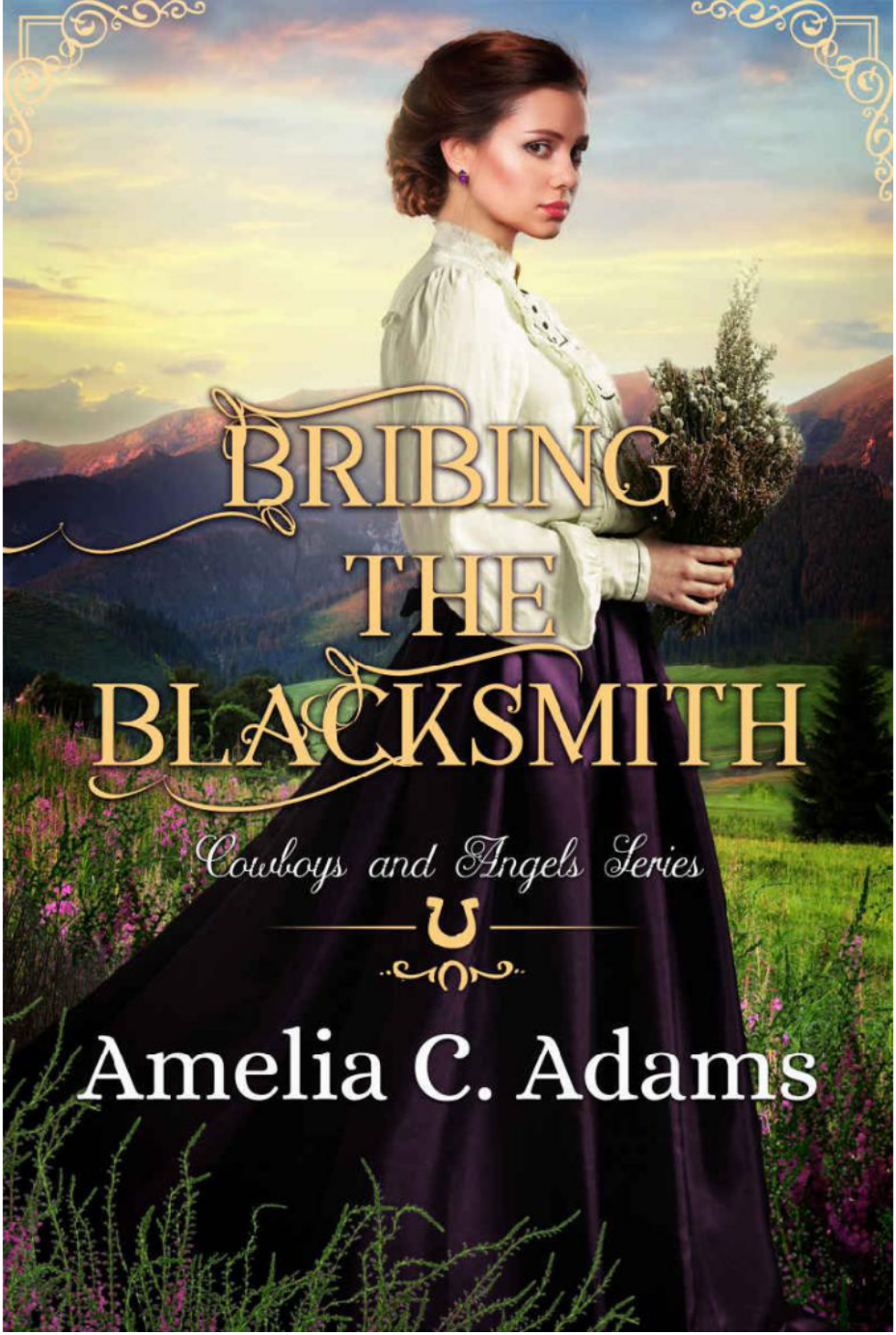

BRIBING THE BLACKSMITH
Cowboys and Angels Series
Amelia C. Adams

Bribing the Blacksmith

Cowboys & Angels Book Nine

by Amelia C. Adams

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Chapter One

With a hiss of smoke and a loud popping sound, the train pulled into the Denver train station and came to a stop. Mariah Redding straightened her back and looked around, wishing this was the end of her journey, but her destination was Creede, not Denver. Thankfully, she only had two hundred and fifty miles to go . . . *only*. She shook her head. Whatever had possessed her to travel to Colorado from her home state of Kentucky? Oh, that's right—marriage. And escape. And she was nearly there, if she could just manage to endure these last interminable two hundred and fifty miles.

When the new passengers boarded and looked around for seats, Mariah noticed two young boys traveling with an older woman who seemed to be a nurse of some sort. She wore a starched white hat, a simple gray dress, and a white apron, and carried a black coat draped over one arm. The March day was rather warm, and at times, it had been nearly stifling on the train.

The little boys were probably four and six years old, dressed in matching navy blue jackets. They looked overwhelmed, and their nurse seemed put out by the way they dragged their feet and didn't know where to go. At last they were settled in across the aisle and three rows down from Mariah, giving her the perfect chance to observe them without being too obvious about it.

Another older woman bustled up the aisle, this one dressed in plum-colored silk taffeta that rustled when she walked. She paused at Mariah's elbow. "Excuse me, dear. Do you mind if I take this seat?"

Mariah did mind, just the smallest bit. She'd managed to get by for most of the journey without having to share at all, and that allowed her to spread out and be as comfortable as one really could be on a train. She couldn't look into this woman's kind face and refuse her, though, so she smiled. "Of course not. Please, join me."

The woman sat down across from Mariah and spent the next ninety seconds arranging her skirts and her bag and her hat and parasol and just about anything else she could possibly have carried

with her. Once everything was situated to her satisfaction, she sat back, clasped her hands across her midsection, and beamed.

"I'm Mrs. Gladstone," she said, giving a nod. "And who might you be, my dear?"

"My name is Mariah Redding. I'm traveling to Creede, Colorado, as a mail-order bride."

"Oh, my," Mrs. Gladstone said, her hand flying to her throat. "That certainly is a romantic notion. How did you decide on it?"

Mariah glanced around. She didn't want everyone in the world to hear her sorry story, but there was something about Mrs. Gladstone that made her feel more comfortable, and truth be told, she did need to tell someone about it or she would burst.

"I was engaged to be married to the pastor of our local church, and he was incorrectly informed that I'd been seen kissing a young man at the train station. He denounced me publicly, and my life became very difficult from that point on."

"That's terrible," Mrs. Gladstone said. She reached forward and patted Mariah's hand.

"It really was terrible. You see, the young man I'd been seen 'kissing' was actually my uncle, my father's youngest brother. My father had just passed away, my uncle had come for the funeral, and I was telling him goodbye as he started back home. I gave him a very proper kiss on the cheek, and the next thing I know, I've been made into the most horrible sort of lady." Mariah winced as she remembered it.

"Why, I can't even imagine," Mrs. Gladstone said, shaking her head. "You must have been heartbroken."

"I was, but I was mostly angry. My fiancé had met my uncle at the funeral, and yet, he chose to believe the word of the so-called witness without even speaking to me. It seems that he would have put two and two together, but he chose instead to leap to the most vile conclusions and make his suspicions public. That's actually how I heard of it—out on the street, not even in a private conversation." Tears prickled Mariah's eyes as she thought of it. "And right after my father's death, too. I've never been so shocked and humiliated in all

my life."

"I'm sure." Mrs. Gladstone gave her a sympathetic look. "What happened next, dear?"

Mariah knew her seatmate was drinking up the story like a sensational novel, but she didn't care—she'd never see this woman again after their journey anyway. "Well, I went to the church and spoke with my fiancé, explained what had really happened, and demanded a retraction of his accusations. I wasn't interested in marrying him anymore—I just wanted the horrible rumors to stop. He didn't reply, but that night, rather late, he came by my house and apologized, and he actually proposed again."

"No!" Mrs. Gladstone's eyes flew open wide.

"Yes. He said he was wrong and he would like to set the record straight by marrying me after all."

"Oh, gracious." Mrs. Gladstone shook her head. "I hope you sent him packing."

"I most certainly did. I told him that I couldn't marry a man whose first reaction was to believe lies about me, and that I never wanted to see him again. Well, he showed even more of his true personality when he didn't retract his accusations after all and continued to let everyone in town believe the worst. I had to leave—I just had to."

"Did you ever learn who had seen you at the train station?"

"No, not specifically, although I have my suspicions that it was the stationmaster's wife. She always enjoyed gossip and stirring things up." And she'd always had a little grudge of some sort against Mariah, for some unknown reason.

"I'm so sorry, my dear. But now you're on a new adventure." Mrs. Gladstone settled back in her seat. "A mail-order bride!"

"Yes. I suppose it seems rather risky, but in light of what was going on at home . . ." Mariah sighed. "I picked up a newspaper at the mercantile and saw an advertisement placed by a man named Lester Coyle. His requirements didn't seem unreasonable—a wife who could cook and clean, had a pleasant disposition, and so forth. I answered the ad, he invited me to come out, and here I am."

“I certainly hope you find your happiness in Creede, my dear,” Mrs. Gladstone replied. “I know I find it a very nice place to live.”

Mariah swallowed. “You live in Creede?”

“I do. I have a little home not far from the main street. That town has seen its fair share of heartache, but I believe it will rise from its ashes, as it were.”

Mariah had thought she was telling her story to a total stranger, someone who would continue on their way and never give her a second thought. But if Mrs. Gladstone lived in Creede, the story of Mariah’s humiliation would soon be all over town, and she’d never escape from it.

“Mrs. Gladstone, I wonder if we could keep this little conversation between us,” she said. “I’m looking for a fresh start, you see, and—”

The other woman held up a hand. “You have nothing to fear from me,” she said with a smile. “I enjoy a story as much as the next person, I admit, but I know when to keep my mouth shut.”

“Thank you,” Mariah told her. “I truly appreciate it.”

A small scuffle across the way caught her attention just then, and she looked over to see the little boys playing tug of war with a book. Their nurse was sound asleep, her head tilted back, and she didn’t look like she’d be waking up any time soon.

Mrs. Gladstone leaned out of her seat and twisted around to see what Mariah was looking at. “Oh, dear,” she said with a chuckle. “They certainly are lively little fellows, aren’t they? A journey like this must be hard for them.”

Mariah looked at the nurse again. The woman was clearly snoring now, even though Mariah couldn’t hear it over the sounds of the train. She shook her head. Such young boys should never be left unattended, and definitely not in public like this. They could get into anything. They could find some way to jump off the train and be killed.

Almost without thinking, she slid out of her seat and crossed over to where the boys were arguing. “Hello,” she said kindly. “Would you like to come sit with me? Your friend here is sleeping, and I have pencils and paper you could draw with.”

The older of the two boys looked doubtful. “We’re tapposed ta

stay with *her*," he said, pointing at the nurse.

"My seat is just right over there, and she'll be able to see you the minute she wakes up," Mariah said. "Plus, I have lemon drops." She realized too late that she was probably teaching the children a very bad thing—they should never let themselves be lured away with candy. It was too late to take it back now, though, as both boys had come to their feet, eager to follow her.

She led them over to her seat and helped them get situated. Mrs. Gladstone's skirts were so voluminous that there almost wasn't room for two small boys, but they made it work. Mariah dug in her bag for paper and pencils, then found the promised lemon drops.

"So, my fine fellows, where are you traveling today?" Mrs. Gladstone asked as the boys began to scribble on their papers.

"We hafta go see my uncle," the older boy said. "He hasta take care of us now because of we're offans."

"You mean orphans?" Mariah asked, her heart constricting.

He nodded. "My ma and pa died and we didn't, so someone hasta take care of us."

"Oh, you poor things," Mrs. Gladstone said. "Is your uncle a nice man?"

The younger boy shook his head, but the older boy answered. "Dunno. We've never seed him before."

"That will certainly be a challenge," Mrs. Gladstone said under her breath.

"He makes shoes for horses. But I din't know horses wear shoes," the boy went on.

Mariah laughed. He was such an earnest little man. "What's your name?"

"I'm Peter, and I'm six. This is Preston, and he's four." He nodded at his little brother. "He doesn't talk much," he went on, whispering loudly. "Don't be 'fended by that. He just doesn't."

"I promise not to be offended," Mariah said, trying not to laugh again. "Where does your uncle live?"

"Somewhere called Creede," Peter answered.

"That's where we're going." Mariah motioned over to Mrs.

Gladstone. “We can all be friends there together.” The thought made her happy. She’d believed she wouldn’t know anyone in town, and now she had three friends already. It just remained for her to make friends with her new husband—she hoped he was a kind man. His letter had been charming, but it was so easy to pretend to be something entirely different on paper. If he turned out to be cruel, she didn’t know what she’d do.

Peter began a lively monologue about what his life had been like when he was a little boy, and how it was different now that he was six. A shadow only crossed his face from time to time when he mentioned one or the other of his parents, but the rest of the time, he was cheery and upbeat. As she listened to him, Mariah felt as though the miles sped by, and it wasn’t long at all before the train was pulling up to their stop in Creede.

“I’ve never had such a lovely train ride,” she told the two boys when their nurse finally woke up and came over to fetch them. “I’ll look for you in town as soon as I get settled.” They both waved to her as they walked down the aisle, and she sat back with a sigh.

“What dear little tykes,” Mrs. Gladstone said as she gathered up her things. “Now, you’re being met here at the station, you said?”

“That’s right,” Mariah replied. Lester had written that he’d be waiting for her on the platform wearing a blue jacket and a brown cowboy hat. She peered out the window, but didn’t see anyone matching that description. Suddenly, her stomach churned. “Have I made a horrible mistake, Mrs. Gladstone?”

“I believe you’ve given yourself a fresh new start,” the woman said. She came to her feet, then looked down at Mariah kindly. “Go embrace your future, my dear.” Then she was gone, heading down the aisle, her plum dress swishing as she went.

Mariah rose also and smoothed down her cocoa-colored traveling dress. She had to make a good impression on Mr. Lester Coyle so he wouldn’t insist on sending her right back home.

She descended the stairs of the train and looked around, still not seeing anyone wearing a blue jacket and a brown hat. She walked over to the side of the platform, searching in every direction with her

eyes. He had probably been delayed by work, or perhaps his horse had refused to be saddled, or . . . something. Trains often ran off schedule, and it wasn't realistic to expect that he'd be here the very moment she arrived.

As she turned to walk back the other way, a pair of strong hands grabbed her from behind and began dragging her roughly toward the edge of the platform.

Her heart leaped into her throat, and then every survival instinct she had roared to life. She screamed as loudly as she could and wrenched her elbows from side to side, then kicked at her attacker's feet and shins. He swore, but didn't loosen his hold, and she found herself nearly being pulled right off the platform. She knew somehow that if she were taken beyond that point, it would be the end for her, so she redoubled her efforts. She pushed down the terror that threatened to choke her and screamed again, this time attracting the attention of some of the people still milling about the station. There had been too much chaos for her to be heard before.

A man in a white cowboy hat and a few days' worth of beard came running toward her, a gun drawn and pointed at the man behind her. She was immediately released, and her assailant ran off. The new arrival fired two shots, then cursed as he slid his weapon back into his holster. "Are you all right, miss?" he asked, turning his attention to Mariah. For a moment, she wondered if this was Lester Coyle, but the hat was wrong, and his jacket wasn't blue, and she was so confused and bewildered.

"I . . . I think so." She placed her hand on her stomach, trying to breathe normally. "That man intended to kidnap me, didn't he?"

"It sure looked that way to me, and if I ever get my hands on him, I'll make sure he knows how I feel about it." He gave a nod. "I'm Marshal Wheeler, miss. I'm sorry your introduction to Creede was so . . . well, let's not focus on that. Are you here to stay, or just stretching your legs on your way through?"

"I'm here to stay. My name is Mariah Redding, and I've come as a mail-order bride."

The marshal tipped his hat. "I'm pleased to know you. Who have

you come to marry?"

"Lester Coyle."

A confused look crossed the marshal's face. "Lester Coyle? I can't say that I know him. He's from Creede?"

"Yes. He said he has a little shop right here in town."

The marshal shook his head. "Miss Redding, I hate to tell you this, but I know every shopkeeper in this place, and not one of them is named Coyle."

Panic shot though Mariah's chest yet again. She fumbled in her reticule and pulled out Lester's letter. "Here—see for yourself."

Wheeler took the folded page and opened it. He read it over slowly, then shook his head again. "I can ask around for you, but I can promise you, miss, there's not a man in Creede or Bachelor or Topaz named Coyle. I figure you've been brought out here on false pretenses."

Mariah stumbled over to a nearby bench and sat down, all the strength gone from her body. "False pretenses? You mean . . . this was all a ruse?"

"That's how it appears to me. You sit tight there for a minute and let me ask around, all right? Do you have a trunk or anything?"

"Just two satchels," Mariah said, nodding toward the train. "They're the two there, waiting to be claimed."

The lawman brought them over to her and set them at her feet, then began talking to the few people who hadn't left yet. She pressed her hands together on her lap, watching as everyone he spoke with shook their heads. What was she supposed to do now?

When Marshal Wheeler returned, his face looked grim. "Miss Redding, no one here has heard of this Lester Coyle. How did you meet up with him?"

"I answered an advertisement in the newspaper." How foolish that sounded now.

"And did he send you money for your fare?"

"No . . . he said he felt uncomfortable sending money through a letter, and that he would pay me back when I arrived." She should have seen through that—she should have known this wasn't a genuine

offer of marriage. Wasn't the husband always supposed to send money to his prospective wife? Wasn't that simply how it worked? "I fear I was too eager to leave home to think things over reasonably."

He nodded. "No one's blaming you for a thing, miss. The first order of business is to find a place for you to be while you rest up from your journey and your . . . well, your little adventure." She knew he meant the near-kidnapping and was trying to be delicate about it. "My wife and I live in Topaz, which is a short distance from here, and you're more than welcome to stay with us. I wonder, though, if you wouldn't prefer to be closer to town until all this is arranged. I see Mrs. Jameson over there—let me go ask her. I'll be right back."

As soon as the marshal walked away, Mariah looked up and saw Mrs. Gladstone scurrying toward her. "My dear, whatever is the matter?" she asked when she drew near. "I was nearly home when I realized I left my parasol on the train, and here you still are, and I thought for sure you would have been carried off by your handsome groom by now."

Mariah pulled in a ragged breath. "Mrs. Gladstone, have you ever met a man named Lester Coyle?"

"No, but there are a great many people around just now that I've never met. We're a growing community, and I can't possibly keep track of everyone." She paused. "What are you saying, dear?"

"The marshal says no one by that name even lives in Creede."

Mrs. Gladstone's hand flew to her throat. "Are you saying . . . my dear, are you all alone and abandoned?"

"It . . . it looks that way." Mariah tried for a brave smile.

"Well, that won't do at all. I'm taking you home with me, and I'll coddle you and set you to rights. Then you can decide what to do from here on out."

Mariah almost refused, thinking that this Mrs. Jameson person the marshal had gone to find was the better choice, but Mrs. Gladstone's compassionate tone of voice convinced her. "Are you sure I won't be a bother?"

"Of course you won't be a bother! My house is much too large for just me, and I'd be delighted of the company. Now, come along and

let's get you settled."

Mariah gathered up the handles of her satchels and followed Mrs. Gladstone away from the station. When they passed the marshal, who was walking toward them, she said, "Thank you so much, but I've found my own place to be." She nodded toward Mrs. Gladstone to indicate where she was going, and then she was on her way to find some sort of peace and solace on a day that had definitely not gone as she had hoped or planned.

Chapter Two

Hans Jensen wiped his forearm on his sleeve, trying to buy a little time before he had to reply to the imperious-looking woman standing in front of him. She was the absolute picture of a stern schoolmarm, with pinched lips and a tight bun and a highly disapproving look on her face.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I don't understand."

She sighed as though repeating herself would be the most horrible thing that had ever happened to her. "My name is Matilda Patterson, and I've brought you your two nephews. Honestly, Mr. Jensen, I don't know why that's such a difficult concept."

"I didn't even know they were coming," Hans tried to explain. "We didn't have a visit scheduled—I've never even met them, actually."

Miss Patterson blinked a few times. "Do you mean to tell me that you don't know?"

"Don't know what?"

She turned and glanced over her shoulder. He could see two small boys waiting outside his smithy, obviously trying to behave themselves, but just as obviously fighting the wiggles. "Mr. Jensen, I thought you'd been informed. I apologize for bringing you the news in this way, but your sister and brother-in-law were killed last week."

Hans felt a wave of nausea pass over him, and he closed his eyes against it. "Killed?" he said after he'd swallowed a few times. "What do you mean?"

"Their carriage slipped off the side of a steep embankment," she told him. "The boys were visiting a friend and weren't with them at the time, thank goodness."

Hans nodded absently. "Beatrice Jameson's parents were killed much the same way," he murmured. Not that the coincidence meant anything. It was just the first thing that came to his mind.

Miss Patterson raised an eyebrow. "Sir, these two little boys are now orphans, and you're their only living relative. They were taken to

the local children's home until you could be located, and well, here you are, and now they're here too. They each have one suitcase—I asked the stationmaster to hold those for you because we weren't capable of lugging them all that distance from the station. I need to be on my way—I'm taking the next train back out of town. Good day, sir, and good luck."

She turned to go, but Hans called to her. "Please, wait."

She looked at him expectantly. "Yes?"

"I . . ." He shook his head. He'd been brought two little boys? He was expected to raise them? This wasn't possible. And his sister couldn't be dead. He pinched his nose bridge, trying to ease the headache behind his eyes. "I don't know how to take care of children."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out." She paused. "I'm not entirely without feeling, Mr. Jensen. I know this is a shock. But I know you'll find a way." With that, she was gone, giving a nod to the boys as she passed them.

Hans pulled in a deep breath. How was this happening? He thought back to the last time he'd seen his sister. It was her wedding, and she'd been so happy. He remembered the little flowers she'd woven throughout her hair, the smile on her face, the way she'd radiated joy as she looked at her new husband. Then they'd moved to Denver and Hans had come to Creede, and for some reason, they hadn't made the effort to see each other since. Why hadn't they? It wasn't such a terribly long distance. He could have closed the forge for a couple of days—why had he thought work was so important?

Now he'd never see her again because he hadn't made his family a priority.

He closed his eyes, fighting another wave of nausea. When he opened them, he saw two little faces peeking in through the doorway, both with eyes as big and bright as stars.

"Are you our uncle?" the bigger boy asked. He looked so much like his mother, Hans had to look twice to make sure it wasn't actually her coming back as a small child to visit him.

"I am," Hans managed to say. His voice sounded strangled. No wonder, with the lump in his throat. He swallowed a few times. "I'm

Uncle Hans." Better, although still weak.

The boys entered the forge slowly, as though they were afraid to be there. Hans imagined that the fire did look rather intimidating. "It's all right," he said. "The fire can't hurt you unless you touch it, but you're both old enough to stay away from it, aren't you?"

They nodded, making a wide arc around the fire as they approached him.

"Well, now." Hans looked them over. "I believe I know your names. You must be Peter, and you must be Preston."

Peter's eyes grew even wider. "How did you know?" he exclaimed.

Hans laughed. "Your mother wrote me letters. She told me what fine boys she had—how much I would like you." He cleared his throat. "She loved you very much."

Peter looked down at the floor and scuffed his feet. "She made us cookies and read us stories," he said, his voice so low, Hans almost couldn't hear it.

"That's definitely what a mother does when she loves her boys." Hans felt the weight of this new responsibility pressing in on him. He was stunned by the news of his sister's death, but he had to be strong for these children who had lost both a mother and a father. Of course he was sorry to hear about his brother-in-law, but in truth, he'd barely known the man. His sister, on the other hand, had been very dear to him. How he wished he'd written her more often—she'd been very faithful in that way, and he hadn't reciprocated.

Now he had a chance to make up for that—he'd do right by her boys. He just didn't have any idea at all how to begin. "Are you hungry?"

Both boys nodded.

Hans didn't have a single thing to eat in his house. He'd planned to go over to the mercantile that afternoon and pick up some tinned things, but the boys were hungry now, not later. Food . . . food . . .

He pulled off his heavy apron, hung it on a hook, and ushered the boys back outside. Then he pulled the doors of the forge closed and locked them. There were certain safety procedures he had to follow if he was to keep curious fingers safe from his operations. "Let's go see

what we can find to eat."

Fifteen minutes later, he and the two boys were seated across from each other at Toria Jackson's kitchen table. The mercantile owner's new wife had taken it upon herself to serve up meals to the hungry miners for a small fee, and while Hans hadn't signed up in advance like he was supposed to, and while it wasn't mealtime, she'd taken one look at the little boys and insisted that they march right upstairs and sit down.

"I won't have hungry children on my conscience," she'd told Hans when he protested. "I don't care that it's not an official mealtime—I'll find you something hot and filling. Just give me a few minutes."

True to her word, she'd found some beef stew in her icebox and warmed it up for them, serving it alongside some fresh, fluffy bread and glasses of frothy milk. The boys dug in like they hadn't eaten in decades, and Hans was nearly as eager. He was tired of his lousy attempts at cooking—maybe he should be eating over here every day.

Toria stood there, her hands on her hips, looking the boys over. "Mr. Jensen, do you have what you need to care for these children?"

Hans shook his head. "I don't even *know* what I need to take care of them, honestly. This was all a big surprise."

"A very delightful one, I'm sure, even though the reasons for it are painful." Her eyes flicked back and forth between the boys, and a tender smile crossed her lips. "When you're done eating, we'll head downstairs and gather you up some supplies. I'd be more than happy to point you in the right direction."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'd be grateful for whatever help you could give me," Hans said. She was making it sound like children needed a whole slew of strange stuff—was this going to be so very complicated? For that matter, where would they sleep—he only had one bed, although he had a spare room. He'd never felt the need to furnish his home much—he never had guests. He pressed his fingers to his nose bridge again. He needed to calm down, to take this one step at a time. After they ate, they'd get the boys' things from the train station, and they'd decide where to put everything. Then he'd worry about a bed

and blankets and . . . and . . . he didn't even know what came next on that list of worries.

"This must be so difficult for you," Toria said kindly. "Please let us help you however we can. I know the ladies in town would love to contribute."

"I couldn't possibly ask," Hans began.

"And that's why you're not asking," she replied. "I'm explaining how we're going to voluntarily help you. There's a difference, you know."

He nodded. He couldn't afford to be prideful—these little boys needed him, and he wasn't prepared in any way to take them in. He'd need all the help he could get.

When he and his nephews had eaten their fill, Toria handed him a basket. "Here's tonight's supper," she said. "Now, let's head down to the store and see what else you might need."

Hans moved along the aisles in a daze, barely listening as Toria chattered. "You'll definitely need some tinned peaches—boys love peaches. Don't they?" His nephews nodded. "Oh, and flour, sugar, baking powder . . ." She stopped suddenly, and Hans nearly ran into her. "Do you know how to cook?"

"Um, not really," he mumbled. "I do a lot of tinned food."

"Oh. Well, that does change things a bit. I'll talk to Beatrice . . ."

Hans wasn't sure if she was still talking to him or to herself, so he just kept following her, and by the time she was done, the counter was piled high. He didn't have much money—how was he supposed to pay for it?

"Now, listen," she said, turning to face him at last. "You're not to worry about this." She waved her hand at the things she'd chosen out for him. "I'm going to put this all on an account for you, and I'm willing to bet that when word spreads about these little cuties, the people of Creede will want to help in any way they can, and they'll make donations."

Hans nearly choked. "I couldn't possibly—"

"That's how the good people of this town *are*," Toria said. "We're not entirely made up of cattle rustlers and outlaws, you know."

“I know, but—”

“Mr. Jensen, are you going to trust me to help you with this or not? You’re a man in a desperate situation. I’m a shopkeeper with means at her disposal to help you out. It would be utterly foolish of you not to accept what I’m offering. A single man with only himself to care for can be foolish once in a while, but when there are children involved, it becomes an entirely different matter.”

Hans nodded. He’d just been lecturing himself about his pride—he obviously hadn’t listened well enough. “Thank you, Mrs. Jackson. I’ll take it and be grateful for it.”

She gave him a bright smile. “That’s more like it. Oh, and we forgot a few things.” She turned and grabbed a loaf of bread and a pie from the display of fresh-baked goods, then reached behind the glass display case and brought out two wooden toy ponies. “The boys need a welcome present,” she said, her voice going soft. “These are on the house.”

Hans bit back his protest. “Thank you,” he replied instead. She flashed him another smile as though understanding how very difficult that had been for him.

“You take the dinner basket, the toys, and the baked goods home with you now, and I’ll send John over with the rest of this later,” she said. “And I imagine you’ll want to prepare yourself for a string of visitors throughout the afternoon.”

Hans ran his fingers through his hair. “All right. How can I ever thank you, Mrs. Jackson?”

She shook her head. “You’re not even to think about that. Go home and get those young men settled.” She nodded to where the boys were waiting by the front door, looking impatient, but standing still. They’d obviously been trained in good manners.

“All right. Are you ready, boys?”

“Yes!” Peter said enthusiastically, and Preston nodded.

“Then let’s be off.” Hans gathered up the basket and the other box Toria had prepared for him, and the threesome walked back up the street. His mind was an absolute whirlwind, and it didn’t seem that he was to get a moment’s peace to sort things out.

Chapter Three

Mariah hadn't brought much with her, so it hadn't taken her long to unpack in Mrs. Gladstone's pretty spare room. The walls were papered with forget-me-nots, and the furniture was richly varnished wood that felt like silk under her fingers. She could find herself very comfortable here and was grateful to have a safe place to stay, but she couldn't shove aside her feelings of humiliation at being tricked, and the terror of being grabbed on the platform. Thank goodness Marshal Wheeler had come along when he had.

She went downstairs and had some hot tea with Mrs. Gladstone, then stood up and walked over to the window, peering out toward Main Street. "Is there a telegraph office in town? I should let my mother know I arrived safely. Well, *mostly* safely."

Mrs. Gladstone chuckled. "I'm sure she'll be glad to hear it. Are you going to tell her everything?"

"No, not just yet. I'll give her a few weeks before I fill her in on the less-savory details. If you'll point me in the right direction, I'll go do that now."

A few moments later, Mariah stepped outside and pulled the front door closed behind her. The telegraph office was located in the same building as the home where the operator lived—that was rather convenient. She found it easily enough and went inside, finding a kind-looking man sitting behind a desk.

"Hello," she said. "I'd like to send a telegram, please."

"You've certainly come to the right place for it, Miss . . ."

"Redding. Mariah Redding."

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Arthur Jameson, and my wife is Beatrice. Are you new in town?"

That was such a hard question to answer now that everything had been tossed on its head. "To be honest, I don't know. Is there work available here?"

"There's certainly a lot of opportunity for it, but as I'm sure you noticed, we're a town in the midst of rebuilding. A fire came through

here not long ago, and not our first, either. We seem to be rather prone to fires." He chuckled. "If I were you, I'd ask around a bit and see who might know of some work. What we need mostly are carpenters and other hard laborers until things are rebuilt."

"I'm afraid I fit in neither category," Mariah said with a chuckle. "I'll do some asking around, though, and see what I might discover."

"And I'll let you know if I hear of anything." Mr. Jameson picked up a pencil. "Now, what would you like your telegram to say?"

That was another hard question. She wanted to assure her mother that she was all right, but she didn't want to give too many details until things were more settled. "How about, 'Arrived in Creede. All is well. Will write soon.'"

Mr. Jameson jotted that down. "Is that everything?"

"I believe so. For now. And I *will* write her soon—I'm not just saying that."

He chuckled. "I believe you. Where am I sending this?"

Once she'd given him all the information he needed and paid him, she stepped back outside, looking up and down the street. Now that he'd pointed it out, yes, she could see damage to some of the buildings, but she could also see that many places looked bright and new and freshly painted. They were sure to need employees now that they were ready for business again.

The most logical thing was to head for the mercantile. One could always count on hearing the latest news at the local shops, and she could rest assured that any available jobs would be known about at the mercantile.

When she entered, she immediately picked up on the scent of bread. She loved that smell more than almost anything in the world.

The pretty woman behind the counter looked up when Mariah entered. "Hello there. How can I help you?"

"Bread," Mariah said, unable to help herself.

The woman laughed. "I'm so sorry, but I just sent the last loaf home with the blacksmith. He's taken in his two little nephews to raise. Can I get you some muffins or another baked good?"

"No, that's all right," Mariah replied, trying to keep her

disappointment out of her voice. “I met those two boys on the train earlier today. They certainly are adorable.”

“Oh? You’ve just arrived? I thought you looked new.” The woman stuck out her hand. “I’m Toria Jackson.”

“I’m Mariah Redding. I stopped by to see if you knew of any job openings available in town.”

Toria looked thoughtful. “Right at this exact moment, nothing comes to mind.”

“Oh.” Mariah leaned on the counter, feeling defeated. No bread, no job . . . no husband . . . She pasted a smile on her face. “I wonder if we might try going about this backwards. What if I were to post on your board with a list of my qualifications? Then someone might see it and contact me about a job.”

“I don’t see why not.” Toria pulled out a piece of paper. “I’ll leave you to work on that while I help Mrs. Clark.”

She turned to the woman who had just walked up to the counter, and Mariah scooted down to the end so she wouldn’t be in the way. Now, just what exactly were her qualifications? She could cook and sew, she knew how to keep a house . . . she was qualified to be a wife or a maid. That was about it. She wasn’t clever with numbers or history—she’d be a terrible teacher. She didn’t have many skills with people—she didn’t believe she’d do well working in a shop. Perhaps a dress shop, where she could sit in the back and sew and let the other ladies deal with the public.

Her list was dismal indeed.

“Welcome to Creede,” the woman named Mrs. Clark said to Mariah as she passed by, her arms full of packages. Mariah managed to thank her before the door closed, then she turned back to her paper.

“This is all I have, I’m afraid,” she said at last, handing it to Toria.

“It’s enough for a start,” Toria replied. She pinned it up on the board above the register. “I’m sure someone will see it and contact you.”

Mariah nodded, trying to look as optimistic as she knew Toria wanted her to feel. She just hadn’t realized until that moment how ill-

equipped she was to take care of herself out in the world. She'd imagined herself married, running a household, and chasing children, not fending for herself and trying to bring in a paycheck.

As she left the mercantile, she sifted through her options. She could go back home to Kentucky. That would thrill her mother no end, but she couldn't live in that community any longer. She'd been branded, held up to public ridicule, denounced by the leader of their congregation. No one would believe her over him. Any sort of life she managed to put together for herself would have to be lived in the shadows. It was true that she didn't want to be out front, but even in those moments when she did want to participate in society, she wouldn't be allowed to. She might as well live in her mother's cellar and never see the light of day for all the forgiveness she'd be given.

She could look for another posting for a mail-order bride. Yes, because that had certainly gone well the first time. How could she ever trust an advertisement again? There was too much at risk. Anyone could place an ad and say anything they wanted in it, and there was no one to regulate the truth of it. She shuddered just thinking about it. No, that would most certainly not suit.

She looked down the road and saw two women walking toward the blacksmith's shop, their arms full of bundles. That was curious—who took bundles to a blacksmith's shop? Shouldn't they be carrying horseshoes or . . . other things made of metal? She had to be honest and admit that she didn't actually know. She shrugged and continued on her way back to Mrs. Gladstone's. She'd try again in earnest the next day. What she wanted most of all was some hot dinner and a bath, and her hostess had promised her both. Then she'd get some sleep and wake up refreshed from her journey, and things wouldn't look so bleak.

John Jackson had delivered the order from the mercantile, and now the kitchen table was stacked high with boxes and cans. Hans looked around, trying to decide where to put everything, but it was becoming increasingly difficult because people kept showing up at his door, just as Toria Jackson had said they would. He was brought stew,

pie, cookies, blankets, outgrown clothing that still had a lot of wear in them—or that's what he was told, as he wouldn't know that for himself. The women of Creede were doing what they could for him, and he appreciated that a great deal. It was more than he could comprehend, really.

Penny Crowther from the dry goods store had also come by, bringing a donation of quality material for trousers for the boys. Hans took it, but he couldn't sew—what was he supposed to do with it? He supposed he could hire someone, and tucked it away with everything else. He knew why Penny was really there and couldn't wait to send her away. She was very much like her older sister, Benita—so eager to get married that she'd flirt with anything that could grow a beard.

Jake, one of the cowboys from the Circle C, came by and delivered a straw tick. "Mrs. Clark was over at the mercantile and heard about your boys, and she asked me to bring this to you," he said. "Putting up two new bodies takes a bit more furniture. She didn't have an extra bedframe, but she thinks this will help."

Hans blinked as he accepted the large and heavy thing. "Thank you," he said, once again overwhelmed.

"That's fresh straw in there, too," Jake said before leaving.

Hans grabbed a broom and cleared out his spare room. He was more than a little embarrassed at how much dust he swept up, but no one was there to see it, and the boys were playing with their toy horses in the other room. He wiped down the top of the small dresser he'd placed in there some time before and then laid the straw tick on the floor. A kindly older woman had come by with sheets, like she knew he'd need them, and he got the bed made up and looking rather nice. He supposed it wouldn't hurt the boys to sleep on the floor until he got a proper frame, not when the tick was so nice and thick.

He had the boys bring their bags into the spare room and unpack, putting their things in the dresser. They hadn't come with much, that was for sure. Then he showed them the rest of the house and the forge, giving them all the proper lectures about not touching the hot things. Then he warmed up the food Toria had sent home with them, sliced the bread, and they ate.

Peter had asked several questions throughout the day, but Preston only looked around with wide eyes, sometimes frightened and sometimes curious. Hans couldn't remember from any of his sister's letters if the boy was somehow delayed in his speech, but he was willing to bet that all the grief and the subsequent upheaval hadn't done him any good at all.

"Preston, I thought we'd go back to the store tomorrow and buy some candy," Hans said, trying something he was quite sure would work. "What do you think?"

The boy just nodded.

"What kind should we get?" Hans asked.

Nothing but a shrug.

"He don't talk much," Peter said. "Mostly I talk for him."

"But how do you know what he wants you to say?" Hans turned his attention to the older boy.

"He's my brother," Peter said, as though that was the most obvious thing in the world. "We have the same heart."

Hans felt his own heart break at that. These poor boys, facing the world with only each other to lean on now, the older one protecting the younger. He vowed in that moment that they would be able to depend on him. He might be completely untrained in how to raise children, but he would do his very best by them, and if nothing else, they would know that he would always be there.

"I think Preston is very lucky to have you," Hans said once he was able to speak again.

Peter shrugged. "God makes brothers so we don't have ta be alone."

Hans studied the table, unable to look up as he finished his meal. If he'd been a better brother, maybe now his sister wouldn't be dead. Maybe they would have lived nearer each other. Maybe . . .

But maybes wouldn't change anything. They'd only make everyone more miserable, and these boys had been through enough misery for a lifetime.

"Let's get you ready for bed," he said after they'd eaten their fill. "What do you usually do when it's bedtime?"

Peter looked at him doubtfully. “You don’t know much about kids, do you, Uncle Hans?”

“I know almost nothing.”

“Well, I tappose we’ll hafta teach you. First, we hafta put on our nightclothes. Then we clean our teeth.”

The boys walked him through the process step by step. They were in utter shock to discover that he didn’t have a Bible in the house. “Uncle Hans, you hafta read your Bible every day,” Peter told him solemnly. “You need ta know where to find God if you go lookin’ for Him.”

Hans felt his cheeks turn red. That was something his mother always used to say, and it sounded like his sister had picked it up. “I’ll see if I can buy a Bible tomorrow,” he promised. He’d meant to buy one, but he’d been so busy setting up the forge and establishing his business that it had slipped his mind. It just went to show that he needed to adjust his priorities, especially if the boys expected to be read to every night. He couldn’t take away something that familiar from them, not knowing it would bring them comfort.

The boys said their prayers and climbed in. Well, Peter prayed for both of them, but Preston grunted something that might have been “amen” at the end. After standing in the hall for a few minutes, Hans turned and walked into the living room, sinking into the chair nearest the fireplace.

What had just happened?

In the space of twelve hours, he’d learned of his sister’s death, been given her children, set up their bedroom, and cleaned their teeth. He’d had lessons about Bible reading, prayer saying, and brothers’ hearts. He felt as though he’d been trampled by a team of horses—his head was killing him, his ribs seemed bruised, and his throat was sore from holding back tears. Maybe now that the boys were in bed and he was alone, it was safe to let loose some of the emotions he’d been stamping down all day, and this horrible pressure would ease.

“Anna,” he muttered, pressing his hands into his eye sockets. His pretty little sister. He and the boys had something very important in common—now they were left with only each other and no one else in

the world.

Chapter Four

Mariah stood in the center of Main Street and spun in a slow circle. Sure enough, she had now visited every last open business in Creede, and not one of them had a job she could do. She couldn't become a miner or a lumberjack or a railroad worker, and the places that would require a female employee weren't rebuilt yet. Someone, a slimy-looking character named Grady, had invited her to go apply at the saloon, but a man standing nearby, a Mr. Clay, had shouldered his way between them and told Mr. Grady to leave her alone.

She thought she might go out to Bachelor, the nearest town, and see if there was anything available out there, but there was something about Creede that called to her. It felt like she was supposed to stay here, not go wandering off around the countryside in search of something she might never find. Her purpose, whatever it might be, was here, in this town that seemed to have no use for her. That was certainly a contradiction, but she supposed she'd figure it out.

"He's never cared for a child in his life, and now he has two," a woman's voice said behind her. She turned to see two ladies walking down the street, their heads bobbing together as they chatted. "I've always thought he was a kind man beneath that gruff exterior, so I have to think he'll be all right, but still."

"Did he get what he needed from the mercantile?" the other woman asked.

"I believe he did, but we can check with Toria." The first woman clucked her tongue. "He's going to need all the help he can get."

It didn't take much imagination to know they were talking about the blacksmith. Mariah shook her head. That must be a challenge, taking on two little boys like that.

"Yes, he *is* going to need every bit of help he can possibly get," Mrs. Gladstone said, suddenly showing up at Mariah's elbow. "And I have the most wonderful idea."

Mariah turned to face her hostess. "Oh?"

"Yes." Mrs. Gladstone looked extremely pleased with herself. Her

dress that day was blue, like the forget-me-nots on her wallpaper. Mariah wished she were brave enough to dress in whatever colors she liked best, but when one had expected to marry a pastor, one wore dresses that were a bit more sedate. “You should go work for him.”

“For the blacksmith?” Mariah was startled. “I don’t know anything about being a blacksmith.”

Mrs. Gladstone gave her a look of sheer exasperation. “Not in the forge, you silly girl. As his housekeeper and nanny.”

“Oh.” Mariah chuckled at herself, but then thought about it seriously. Yes, she certainly could handle that work without any trouble whatsoever, and she already cared about the boys. “Do you think he’d want to hire me? He doesn’t seem wealthy enough to bring in help.”

“All you can do is ask,” the woman replied. “And I’m happy to consider you my guest for as long as you need, and that will keep your expenses down.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t ask that of you,” Mariah exclaimed. “I’m eating all your food—”

“Hardly,” Mrs. Gladstone said. “And in case you hadn’t noticed, my dear, I’m rather well off.” She leaned in and lowered her voice at the last part. “Let me have a little fun with my money, won’t you? Stay with me, at least for a while, and let me make you a gift of some new clothes while we’re at it. I don’t think you brought nearly enough with you to start afresh.”

“But . . .” Gracious. This woman was so incredibly generous, it was beyond Mariah’s comprehension. “I can’t possibly pay you back.”

“Did I say anything about paying me back?” Mrs. Gladstone’s face took on a wistful look. “I never had a daughter, my dear, and one thing I always wanted to do was take a girl shopping and let her choose whatever pretty things she wanted. Give an old woman a few moments of happiness, won’t you?”

Well, now. She might look innocent, but *this* old woman certainly knew how to get what she wanted. “If you’re sure.”

“Quite frankly, I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.” Mrs. Gladstone looped her arm through Mariah’s. “Why don’t you

head over to the blacksmith's shop and speak with Mr. Jensen, and I'll meet you at the mercantile? I saw some lovely dark purple fabric there the other day that I think would be splendid for a skirt, and . . ."

Mariah was still laughing a moment later as she approached the forge. She could hear the ringing of a hammer on metal as she entered the building, but it took a few seconds for her eyes to adjust to the change from the bright sunlight outside to the dim exterior, backlit by a glowing orange fire.

The man wielding the hammer paused in his work. "Yes? May I help you?"

Suddenly, she was nervous. He was quite good-looking, even though he wore a thick, heavy apron and sweat was pouring down his face. His arms were well muscled, as she supposed they'd have to be in his line of work, and she'd never been quite so intimidated by a man in her life.

"Um . . ."

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry, miss, but I need to pound out this shoe before it cools. Do you mind?"

"No. Not at all. I can wait."

Even though she was a little taken aback by his sharp manner, she watched in fascination as he brought his hammer down over and over again, shaping the metal as it glowed as orange and bright as the fire. At last he took it up with a pair of tongs and submerged it into a bucket of water nearby, steam rising out the top, and then he laid down his tools.

"I apologize," he said, wiping his forehead with his arm. "But I have to strike while the iron is hot, as they say."

"I suppose you must," she said with a chuckle. "I'm sorry for interrupting your work."

"It's not an unwelcome interruption. What can I do for you?"

She pulled in a breath, her stomach fluttering. She hadn't been nervous a moment ago out on the street, but now, she was. "My name is Mariah Redding, and I met your two nephews on the train yesterday morning. We got along quite well, and I'm looking for work, and I understand that you're not accustomed to children, and I thought . . ."

“Yes?” he prodded when she didn’t continue.

“I’m obviously intruding,” she said, losing all her nerve. “Never mind.”

“Wait.”

She looked back up at him. “Yes?”

“Are you saying you’d like to work for me?”

Her tongue felt tied. “I just thought you might need someone to watch the children, maybe some cooking and cleaning.”

He nodded. “I appreciate the offer, Miss Redding, but we’ll be all right.”

But . . . She twisted her hands together. “I understand. Have a good afternoon.”

She escaped from the heat of the forge as quickly as she could and decided to blame the fire for the heat she felt in her cheeks. Why had she become so nervous all of a sudden? It wasn’t like she’d never seen a handsome man before. There were quite a goodly number of them in Kentucky, and Colorado was bound to have its fair share as well.

She walked down the street and entered the mercantile, finding Mrs. Gladstone back by the fabric. “Here’s the purple,” the woman said, handing her a bolt. “And this yellow would look lovely on you, and I thought this pink would be so becoming.”

Mariah allowed her hostess to pile her arms full, not really paying attention to what was being said. “I believe I made a horrible fool of myself,” she said when she was able to get a word in at last.

Mrs. Gladstone looked at her, hands filled with spools of thread. “I don’t know how you could have, my dear.”

“I bumbled around like a schoolgirl, Mrs. Gladstone. My tongue wouldn’t work, and I felt lightheaded, and he probably thinks I’m a complete nincompoop.”

The woman laughed. “You found him handsome, did you?”

Mariah’s cheeks felt warm again, but this time, she wasn’t standing near a fire and couldn’t place the blame there. “Yes, I did.”

“I think that’s wonderful. We all need something nice to look at from time to time, don’t we?” She smiled and tucked some money into Mariah’s hand. “Go up front and pay. I need to step over to the dry

goods store for a moment, and I'll meet you out front."

"All right," Mariah said, watching the woman bustle out the door.

Toria Jackson was only too happy to help Mariah with her purchases. "Oh, you chose lovely colors for your complexion," she said as she picked up the pink.

"I never really know what I should wear," Mariah said, embarrassed to admit this. It seemed that every woman should know something so basic about herself.

"You did very well today." Within minutes, the fabric was cut and wrapped, and the total was given. Mariah almost gasped when she heard the amount, but it was less than what she held in her hand, so she passed the money across the counter and tried not to feel guilty. She'd discuss it with Mrs. Gladstone later and see what she could do about the expense.

When Hans entered the house portion of the forge a few minutes later, he was greeted by two little boys and their toy horses. "Was that the lady from the train?" Peter asked. "I seed her through the window."

"She said she met you on the train, yes," Hans replied.

"She was nice. Why was she here?"

Hans needed a cold drink. Breathing the hot air in the forge dried his throat out something awful. He walked into the kitchen, took a swig from the jar of water he kept in the icebox, and turned back to the boys. "Oh, she thought she might work here, but I told her we were getting along fine."

"I liked her," Peter said. "She told us stories and let us draw."

"That was very nice of her." Hans took another few swallows, then refilled the jar from the bucket in the corner and put it back in the icebox.

"And she's pretty," Peter went on.

"Yes, she's very pretty." Hans couldn't deny that. He'd have to be completely blind not to notice her flushed cheeks and her sparkling eyes. But he didn't need a housekeeper or a cook or any of it—he couldn't afford it, and he could manage just fine. He'd figure it out.

“Now, what should we have for dinner? Mrs. Clay brought over some chicken and dumplings, and Mrs, Jackson made roast.” See? Dinner wasn’t a problem at all. What might be a problem, though, was in a week or two when the good women of Creede decided that they’d done enough and the meals stopped coming in. Then he might be in trouble.

He’d worry about that when it happened, though.

Chapter Five

"I suppose there could be any number of jobs in Denver," Mariah said as she studied the plate before her. Roast chicken, potatoes, fluffy rolls—it looked delicious. "I can see about getting a Denver newspaper. There are sure to be some advertisements."

Mrs. Gladstone shook her head. "I know it seems hopeless right now, my dear, but I wouldn't give up just yet. Didn't you say you felt there was some sort of purpose for you in Creede?"

"I did, but I could be mistaken. How can I tell the difference between real intuition and just flights of fancy? If I was supposed to be here, wouldn't I have found whatever it is I'm meant to do?"

Mrs. Gladstone swallowed the bite she'd taken. "That's rarely how it works. We have to search it out even if it's meant to be. That's what gives life meaning—the effort we put into it. Imagine if everything was just handed to us all the time. It would be utterly boring."

Mariah thought about that while she chewed. "So, let's say I stay here in Creede, and I keep looking," she said at last. "Where do you recommend that I look? I've put an ad of sorts on the board at the mercantile, and I've walked the entire length of Main Street to speak with all the shopkeepers. It doesn't take long to say, 'Sorry, we're not hiring,' so I accomplished that task rather quickly. What avenues haven't I explored? I must be missing something."

"I think you've already explored the avenue, but the avenue told you no."

Mariah lifted an eyebrow. "Beg pardon?"

"You've heard the story of Jericho in the Bible, haven't you? It was an impenetrable fortress, but the children of Israel had to get around it to reach the promised land?"

Mariah nodded. "So they were told to march around it and blow their horns. I never understood how blowing their horns could knock down walls."

"It wasn't the horns that did it, my dear. It was an act of God sent as a blessing for their obedience. Goodness, if the walls were so flimsy

that some mere trumpets could knock them over, that's not much of a fortress, is it?" She chuckled. "My point is this—sometimes we have to play a few trumpets in our own lives. March around and remind people we exist."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Gladstone, but I don't understand." Mariah's hostess was eccentric, that was for certain.

"I'd hoped you'd get the idea on your own so you'd feel quite accomplished, but I suppose I can be a little less vague," Mrs. Gladstone said. She set her fork down and focused her gaze on Mariah. "Take a covered dish over to the restaurant so they can try your cooking. Take a sewing sample over to the tailor or the dressmaker and show them your fine stitching. Prove that you're the kind of employee they want instead of just telling them. Remind them who you are—be visible. March around their buildings and toot your horn a bit." She giggled at her own joke. "Don't give up, Mariah. The best things come after perseverance."

"I suppose I could do that," Mariah said, thinking it over.

"I'm positive that you can. We'll worry about that tomorrow, though. For tonight, concentrate on getting a good night's sleep. You've been so eager to find a job that you've hardly rested at all—I have a whole library full of books, if you'd care to borrow any, and you could take a pot of tea up with you."

That sounded wonderful, and exactly what Mariah needed. After she helped clear the table, she looked over the shelves upon shelves of books available to her and chose out a few, then climbed the stairs to her room. Gertie, the quiet little housemaid, brought her a tray a short time later, and she sat in bed sipping tea and reading exciting stories about love and adventure. Once she had a job, she wouldn't have this kind of freedom, so she might as well enjoy every second of it while she had the chance.

"Uncle Hans! Uncle Hans!"

At the panicked yell, Hans dropped the horseshoe he was pounding into the water and raced into the house, looking around. "What's the matter?"

Peter came around the corner, holding the hand of a sobbing Preston. “He catched his finger in the door,” he said, pointing at his brother’s finger. It was red and white, and Hans could clearly see where the skin had been pinched. “He was just tryin’ to stop it from slamming, and it got catched.”

Hans took the little finger very carefully and checked it for breaks. He didn’t think there were any, but he wasn’t a doctor—how was he supposed to know? “I think it’ll be fine,” he said, giving the boy a reassuring smile.

Preston just looked at him and gave another shuddering sob.

“You don’t know the song, do you?” Peter asked.

“Um, the song? What song?”

Peter gave a long sigh. “The make-it-better song. The one Mama always used to sing when we got hurted.”

“I’m sorry, boys. I don’t know that song.”

Peter sighed again. “It’s all right. Uncles just don’t know all the mama stuff.”

Hans took a seat in a nearby chair and ran his fingers through his hair. “Nope, uncles don’t, do they? But there’s one thing uncles are really good at, and that’s listening. So why don’t you sing me the song, and then I’ll know it?”

Peter looked doubtful, but Preston nodded. That was encouraging—it was usually Preston who seemed to give him a hard time.

“Okay, the song goes like this.” He began a warbling, tuneless little song, something Hans couldn’t even begin to follow. He wasn’t even catching all the words. When he was done, Preston gave him a smile.

“Well done,” Hans said. “Thank you for singing it. I’ll memorize it, and next time, I’ll give it a try, all right? It looks to me like you took care of Preston all by yourself.”

Peter looked proud of himself. “I did, huh?”

“You did. Now why don’t you climb up to the table and I’ll cut you some bread and butter.”

As Hans went back out to the smithy and prepared to heat the shoe again, he shook his head. How was he to manage this? He

couldn't leave the two little boys unsupervised in the house while he tried to work, and he had to complete his orders or he wouldn't get paid. He simply couldn't run any later than he already was—finances were scarce, and now he had two boys to care for. He passed his hand down his face, then put the shoe back in the fire. He didn't even know the special song.

"All right, Mrs. Gladstone, tell me what you think." Mariah set the plate in front of Mrs. Gladstone and stepped back, nervous and excited all at once. She'd spent the morning in the kitchen putting together a few of her best recipes so she could impress the restaurant with her skills, and Mrs. Gladstone would help her decide which ones to present.

"This does look very nice," Mrs. Gladstone said, peering down at the pot roast and potatoes. "Did you find everything you needed in the kitchen? Remember, we can always get more if you run out."

"I did find everything, thank you." In fact, Mariah had never seen a kitchen so well stocked. Mrs. Gladstone's household was very small—just herself, a cook, and a maid. Why did she have so much food on hand all the time? Mariah shrugged to herself. It was none of her business, really, and she was blessed to share in the bounty.

"Let's give it a taste." Mrs. Gladstone picked up her knife and fork and sliced off a bite of meat. She popped it in her mouth and began to chew, and then chewed some more. Mariah watched her with curiosity, and then with concern.

When the woman finally swallowed, Mariah asked, "What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing, dear," Mrs. Gladstone replied. "It was just a bit . . . tough."

"Tough? Really?" Mariah was thoroughly embarrassed. She'd made that dish dozens of times back home in Kentucky, and she really thought it was one of her best.

"It could be that you're using a different oven," Mrs. Gladstone pointed out. "They all have their tricks, you know."

"Maybe. What about the potatoes?"

Mrs. Gladstone took a bite. “They could have used a bit of salt.”

Mariah closed her eyes. Salt. How could she have forgotten salt? She’d thought she was being so careful . . . but no, now that she thought about it, she’d been thinking about the plot of the book she’d read the night before, and she was distracted. Who wanted to think about things like salt when one could be thinking about the merits of one Sir Everett McAvoy, with his dazzling blue eyes and flowing black locks?

“Let’s move on to the next dish,” she said, whisking that plate away and replacing it with another. She’d use the rest of the roast and potatoes in a stew—she could at least keep from wasting the food she’d experimented with. “Here are some chicken and dumplings.”

Which turned out to be little soggy dough balls.

“Or some steak.”

Which somewhat approximated shoe leather.

Mariah sank into the other chair at the table and put her head in her hands. “I don’t understand it, Mrs. Gladstone. I’m a good cook—I really am.”

“I believe you, dear,” the older woman said, patting her shoulder. “Perhaps you’re not meant for restaurant life just yet, though. I wonder if you should go talk to Julianne Fontaine. She runs a school over in Bachelor, and she might be in need of a schoolroom assistant.”

“Do you think I’d actually have to teach anything? I’d be a terrible teacher.”

Mrs. Gladstone leaned back and regarded her. Mariah was getting used to that look. It was a mixture of sheer exasperation and fondness. “Why don’t you head down to the mercantile and pick me up another spool of purple thread? While you’re walking, I’m sure your mind will clear, and we can think of a few more good ideas to try.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Gladstone. I do think a walk would be good for me. Oh, and I’ve told Cook I’d take care of the leftovers, so she won’t have to make dinner tonight.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Mrs. Gladstone said, a polite smile on her face.

Mariah cringed as she tied on her bonnet. She’d made an absolute

fool of herself, trying to pass herself off as a good cook—she was just glad that she'd tested the food on Mrs. Gladstone first. It could have been so much more embarrassing than it actually was.

"Hello there!"

She heard the voice as soon as she reached the sidewalk, and she shielded her eyes from the spring sun to see Marshal Wheeler striding toward her. "Hello, Marshal. It's a pleasure to see you."

When he reached her side, he pulled off his hat. "Miss Redding, as promised, I've done more asking around. As near as we can figure it, the man who tried to abduct you may have been part of a larger group that's been operating in this area for a little while. Several of our young ladies went missing and were held against their will. They've since been rescued, but we haven't yet caught the men behind it all, and your circumstance might be another phase in their plan."

"Do you mean that other girls might be on their way here now, just as I was?" Mariah blinked several times, trying to fathom what all that might mean.

"Might be. I don't know that for sure, though."

"But . . . what can be done about it?"

"I've spoken with the stationmaster and deputized him. He'll be on the lookout for any suspicious activity. I'll also have one of my men on the platform whenever a new train comes in. We're also looking at ways to put the conductors of the trains on alert and asking them to keep an eye on any ladies traveling alone. They already do, but they can't be everywhere at once."

Mariah shook her head. "That sounds overwhelming, Marshal. How can you possibly track every passenger coming through here? Especially with the way the town is growing?"

He rocked back on his heels. "Well now, it's going to be a challenge, but we'll do what we can."

"And I appreciate that. I don't mean to sound discouraging—I'm just amazed at how complicated and difficult something like this is bound to be. I have every confidence in you and your men, Marshal."

"Thank you, Miss Redding, and I'll be in touch when I have more information."

He continued down the street, and Mariah took a moment to center herself. It seemed an utter impossibility that they would ever be able to catch the man who had accosted her, and knowing that he was still out there somewhere made her feel unsafe. She'd managed to push that aside while chatting with Mrs. Gladstone and coming up with ideas for her career, but this was certainly a stark reminder of her reality.

When she reached the mercantile, she purchased more of the purple thread Mrs. Gladstone had requested, said hello to Toria Jackson, and was told that no one had inquired about her little advertisement. She supposed that was to be expected, the way her luck had been running.

She left the store and had just gathered up her skirts to step into the road when she heard the whinny of a horse and a man's angry shouting. She looked up to see Peter and Preston cowering at the street's edge, a man trying to get his horse under control, and several aghast onlookers. Without thinking, she marched up to the scene.

"Excuse me. What has just happened here?"

The man held his horse's bridle tightly in one hand and pointed with the other. "Those children just darted out in front of me. I could have killed them both."

Mariah turned and bent to speak to the boys. "Are you all right?" They nodded. "What were you doing in the street?"

"I wanted lemon drops, and that's where they are," Peter said, and Preston nodded again.

"And where is your uncle?" She scanned the crowd, but didn't see the tall blacksmith anywhere.

"He's making shoes for horses," Peter replied.

Mariah straightened to her full height and turned back to the man on the horse. "I'm sorry, sir. Are you injured?"

"No, just startled. And them?"

"They're all right too."

He gave a nod, touched the brim of his hat, and continued on his way.

Mariah pressed her lips together. "Well, now. Let's go see Uncle

Hans, all right, boys?”

Chapter Six

Hans smoothed out the last jagged edge of the horseshoe and was just about to compare it to the gelding's hoof when the door to the smithy opened and a young woman walked in. Before he even saw her face, he knew it was the woman from the train, the one the boys liked.

"Excuse me, Mr. Jensen, but we need to have a talk."

He held up the shoe. "Can you give me just a moment, miss?"

"No, I can't. I gave you that courtesy before, and now it's time you gave some courtesy to me."

He blinked. She seemed much different than she had on her first visit. She'd been hesitant and unsure, and now she was angry and determined. What had brought this about?

He plunged the shoe into the bucket, recognizing that if he didn't turn his attention to her, she wouldn't go away. "Yes?" he asked once the steam had stopped rising from the water.

"I just retrieved your two nephews from the side of the street, where they had just nearly been run over by a horse."

Hans felt a sudden wave of panic wash over him. "Where are they? Are they all right?"

"They're perfectly all right now, no thanks to you. They're sitting down at the kitchen table having some cookies, which Mrs. Jackson over at the mercantile brought over as soon as she saw what had happened. Mr. Jensen, you can't continue on this way. You can't allow them to run wild while you're locked away in here, completely oblivious to the world."

She was right. He knew she was, and yet, he resented her insinuation that he wasn't doing his best by the children. "Miss …?"

"Redding. Mariah Redding. We met before, remember? When I offered to help you, and you turned me down?"

"I remember who you are—I just couldn't remember your name. That's an entirely different thing." He straightened his stance. "Miss Redding, I don't like your suppositions and I don't like your tone. You know nothing about what's going on here. You don't know how hard

it's been to do my work and to figure out how to care for these boys. You don't know my level of commitment, and to charge in here flinging accusations around like . . . like horse manure . . . is unfair. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a horseshoe to finish."

He expected her to back down. Most people did when he brought himself to his full height—he wasn't a small man. She, however, straightened her stance as well and stared him down. She was still far shorter and would only have reached his earlobe if they were standing side by side, but he could see that her inner determination hadn't been squelched one bit.

"You have no idea what I do or do not understand, Mr. Jensen. That's some pretty pungent manure you're flinging around yourself. What I see is a man who's overwhelmed with responsibility and is letting things slip through the cracks—or in this case, letting children slip through the door. I also see a man who's too stubborn to accept the help he's being offered. I truly hope that for the boys' sake, if for no other reason, you'll change your mind. In the meantime, I'll leave you to fester in your own sense of duty and independence—I'm quite sure it's enough to keep your ego as well muscled as the rest of you."

With that, she spun on her heel and left, leaving Hans so startled, he had nothing to shout out in reply as the door closed.

Mariah stood outside the blacksmith shop, pulling in air as quickly as she could without making herself lightheaded. She'd expected the man to be more concerned about his nephews than he was about his pride, but no—she'd been most unpleasantly surprised. She'd never felt so angry in all her life. How dare he . . .? How could he . . .? Breathing alone wasn't working. She closed her eyes, placing her hand on the doorframe for balance. Of all the infuriating . . .

When she opened her eyes, she saw Mrs. Gladstone across the street waving to her, then raising her hands to her mouth and pantomiming playing a trumpet. Then she flicked her fingers in a shooing motion toward the blacksmith's shop. What? She couldn't possibly mean for Mariah to go back in there. She'd rather . . . she'd

rather eat a rattlesnake. With the rattles.

But as she thought about it, she realized that she had to give it one more try. Just one, and that was for the sake of the boys. If he still wouldn't listen, she'd have to trust in providence to bring about whatever solution would be best. She just couldn't erase the frightened looks on the boys' faces from her mind, and for that matter, the man on horseback had looked plenty frightened himself. It had been a terrible situation all around.

Mrs. Gladstone was grinning like a Cheshire cat as she waited for Mariah to make up her mind. Mariah shook her head with amusement and turned back to the door. All he could do was yell at her again, and she wasn't going to allow some man's temper tantrum frighten her.

She flung the door open and marched back in. "Mr. Jensen—"

He turned from the fire, holding the horseshoe between his tongs. He held it up. "Miss Redding, do you have any idea how many times I've had to reheat this shoe? Did you know that the man who owns this horse is waiting for me to finish so he can ride to Topaz to conduct some important business, and that he's about ready to go hire a buggy from Otto Clay because I'm taking so long? Will you kindly be seated and allow me to finish? I've just checked on the boys. They're playing with their horses in the front room and have promised to stay there. Everything is under control if I could just finish this task."

Mariah blinked. "All right." She glanced around and spotted a stool. It wasn't the most comfortable-looking thing, but she'd make it work.

She watched as Hans laid the horseshoe back on the anvil and gave it some good whacks with his hammer. The sound reverberated through the forge, making her wince, and she wondered how he ever stood it day in and day out.

He finished giving the metal the shape he wanted by laying it over the pointed end of the anvil and striking it several times. Then he laid it back on the top and pounded it more, she assumed to make sure it was good and flat. Then he walked over to the horse tied up at the side of the large room and picked up a hind hoof, visually comparing the shoe in his tongs to the hoof he held.

He plunged the shoe into the water for just a brief second. The metal was still clearly hot when he pulled it out, but it didn't have the bright orange glow it had a moment before. He laid the shoe on the bottom of the horse's hoof and gave a satisfied nod, then began hammering the shoe into place. Mariah winced.

"Doesn't that hurt the horse?" she asked.

"Not if it's done well. It hurts them more to carry a rider without being shod." He didn't look at her while he answered, but kept his head bent to his work.

"How did you get it so close to the right size?"

"I measured it in my mind."

"I beg your pardon?"

He glanced up at her. "I looked at the horse's hoof while I was filing it down before. Then I created the shoe to fit."

"But that's astonishing. Does every blacksmith do that?"

"Most blacksmiths measure with a ruler. I'm just not most blacksmiths." He flashed her a grin, which caught her completely off guard, and she sat back and clamped her mouth shut. What on earth . . . the man was actually charming. How was that even possible?

After the shoe was nailed into place, he took up a file and worked around the edges of the hoof. The rasping sound grated down Mariah's spine, but she sat still, not wanting him to see just how very much it bothered her. If she went running, he'd never accept her as being a strong, serious woman, and that's exactly how she had to present herself to him.

"There," he said at last, lowering the horse's leg to the floor and standing up straight. "You can unclench your teeth now, Miss Redding."

"I . . . don't know what you mean," she said.

He gave her a look. "Yes, you do. Now, then. You wanted to speak with me yet again. Now that I'm finally finished, what would you like to say?"

She stood and held her bag in front of her with both hands. "I'd like to apologize for my earlier behavior. I was quarrelsome and rude. You were as well, and I'll let you apologize in a moment, but right

now, it's my turn."

He raised an eyebrow, but didn't interrupt, and she kept on. "We're both in a bind, Mr. Jensen. You need a helper, and I need to help. If I don't find some sort of occupation here in Creede, I'll have to be on my way, and I've already traveled so far. I was nearly abducted off the train platform—no, I mean it. You can ask the marshal. I've spoken with every business owner in town, and no one will hire me. I'm just looking for a place to be for a while until I get my feet under me. In the meantime, you have two little boys who need constant supervision, and your line of work requires focus and concentration."

He gave a nod, which emboldened her to continue. "You mentioned before that you couldn't afford much by way of wages. I don't need to ask for much, so you're in luck. I'm staying with a benefactress who is giving me use of a bedroom as well as my meals. She insists, and won't let me repay her. So you see, my living expenses are quite low at the moment, and it's really the most ideal situation all the way around."

Mr. Jensen looked down at the floor, then back up. "Why? Why are you so determined to finagle your way in here and foist your help on me?"

"Is that what I'm doing? I rather thought I was coming here in your hour of need to make a solid business proposition that would benefit us both." Charming . . . and stubborn. As stubborn as the way was long.

"I don't know, Miss Redding. It just seems like we'd be taking a whole lot more than you'd be getting."

Mariah pulled in a breath. She imagined Mrs. Gladstone out there on the sidewalk with her pretend trumpet and had to fight a smile. "I tell you what. Let me give you a sample, as it were, or a trial run. I'll watch the boys and take care of the house for one day. If, at the end of that one day, you're dissatisfied with me, you can send me on my way. And in the meantime, you'll have your larder filled with fresh homemade bread." She crossed her fingers behind her back—*hopefully* she'd be able to make bread. Her cooking experiments at Mrs. Gladstone's had been anything but successful, after all.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Let me get this straight. You’re offering to give me a free day of watching the boys, plus housework, plus bread? For nothing in return?”

“Nothing until you decide you can’t live without me.” She immediately wished she could crawl into a hole and die. He must think she was so forward! “And offer me a job,” she tacked on the end as quickly as she could, hoping he wouldn’t notice her slip of the tongue.

“It sounds to me, Miss Redding, as though you’re attempting to bribe me.”

“Well, is it working?”

He regarded her for a long moment. “One day. Tomorrow. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Then we’ll see.”

She grinned. “I agree to those terms, Mr. Jensen. And I promise, you won’t regret it.”

“I already do, Miss Redding. I already do.”

Chapter Seven

When Mariah stepped back outside, it was all she could do not to give a small shout of victory. Mr. Jensen wasn't using his hammer at the moment to drown out the sound, though, so she stayed quiet.

Mrs. Gladstone was waiting for her, a smile on her face, and she beamed as Mariah approached. "I trust it went well?"

Mariah sighed. "That man is the most stubborn, prideful, arrogant human being I've ever met."

"But he said yes?"

"He agreed to a trial. I'll come and take care of things tomorrow, and then he'll decide."

Mrs. Gladstone tucked her arm through Mariah's. "Good for you. What a marvelous demonstration of your determination."

They turned to walk back toward the house. "I thought you weren't coming into town and that's why you had me buy your thread," Mariah commented.

"Well, I wasn't planning it, per se, but then I realized I wanted some buttons," Mrs. Gladstone replied.

Mariah stopped walking. "You have every button in the world! I've seen your sewing room."

Mrs. Gladstone chuckled. "All right, you've caught me. I wanted to see how you were getting along. An old woman must find her fun where she can."

"And so you resorted to trickery and spying? Really, Mrs. Gladstone." Mariah pretended to disapprove as they continued walking. Truth be told, however, she had the woman to thank for her success. If Mrs. Gladstone hadn't been there to urge her to go back, she wouldn't have managed to get a trial run, and for some reason, that opportunity seemed very important—much more important than working at a restaurant or any other business would have been. There was a sense of purpose in this, and she couldn't wait to see how it all played out.

After handing off the horse and collecting his payment, Hans closed down the forge for the night and turned his attention to the house. He had a roast chicken in the icebox, courtesy of another kind neighborhood lady, and that would make a good dinner. He needed to send some clothes home with Fiona, the girl who did his laundry, or he'd be out of anything decent to wear, and he knew the boys needed their things washed too. Oh, and another trip to the mercantile for things like coffee. And the logging chain for Mr. Caruthers that had a broken link. On and on . . . He pressed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. Just a bit too much to deal with all at once.

He entered the house and closed the connecting door to the forge firmly. The boys came running to greet him, and he had to admit, it was rather a nice feeling, being welcomed home when he was used to stillness.

"Let's sit down and have a little talk," he said, leading them both into the front room. "I understand that you went into the street today."

Peter nodded. "We wanted some lemon drops, but you said not to come near the fire when you're working. We know where the store is, so we tried to go."

"And what happened?"

Preston's eyes filled with tears, but Peter continued on bravely. "We almost got smashed by a horse. But that train lady was there and talked to us."

"It's very, very dangerous to go out by yourselves," Hans said, wondering how to get this message across. He needed them to understand, but at the same time, he didn't want to scare them *too* badly. "What if the horse really had smashed you?"

"We would have been broken. Like our parents," Peter said.

Hans closed his eyes, then opened them again. The child had spoken so calmly, as though there was no emotion attached to his words, and yet, he knew that was far from the truth. "So, you see why it's important to wait for a grown-up to take you," he said at last, not sure what else to say.

Both boys nodded.

“Now, I have some good news,” he went on. “The train lady, as you call her, came to see me today, and she wants to take care of you boys tomorrow. She says she’ll make us some nice meals. What do you say to that?”

“Will she take us for lemon drops?” Peter asked.

“I think we’ll see if you can earn some lemon drops,” Hans replied. After hearing of the boys’ near miss, he’d been torn between immense gratitude for their safety and anger that they hadn’t stayed in the house. That made him alternate between wanting to shower them with treats and paddling their behinds. He wondered if every guardian of small children felt that way, and suspected he wasn’t alone.

“We like her. She’s nice,” Peter said, and Preston nodded.

“Good.” Hans hoped he’d like her too. Then he paused. If he did like her, he’d be obligated to keep her on, and he wasn’t sure how he felt about that. He’d lived on his own for a good long time, and it had been hard enough to consider sharing his roof with two small boys. Now to think about taking in someone else—a woman, even, who thought she knew more about his life than he did? She was going to mess everything up—it was impossible for her not to. There were reasons why he hadn’t married yet, and women had to do with every one of those reasons.

He fed the boys some chicken and the rest of the bread Mrs. Jackson had brought over, and a little digging revealed just enough peach pie remaining for them each to have a slice. He read the boys a bedtime story after being reminded that he’d forgotten to buy a Bible that day—he wasn’t even sure if the stores in town carried them on a regular basis or if he’d have to special order one. What made him chuckle was to hear Peter’s earnest little bedtime prayer. “Please bring us a Bible because Uncle Hans keeps forgetting, and we don’t want him to be a heathen.” Just what had his sister been teaching these boys?

At last, he climbed into his own bed and stared at the ceiling. He’d survived another day, when he didn’t even think he’d survive one. He must be doing well—although, what could have happened to the boys

out there on the street was no laughing matter, and he could hardly give himself points for it. Maybe he could install a high lock on the door that neither of them could reach. That would be a good starting place, along with continued lessons about safety.

And actually having someone to watch them, a voice said in the back of his mind, the voice that popped up whenever he was being particularly stubborn about something—the voice he really didn't care to listen to. He'd better learn to listen, though, because it wasn't just about him anymore.

It was sure a lot easier when it was.

Hans heard a knocking sound on his front door before he'd even pulled his shirt all the way on. He buttoned it as he trotted down the stairs, grumbling. If Miss Redding thought to incur his favor by being so early, she'd find herself mistaken. He wasn't a morning person, and he didn't appreciate interruptions to his routine.

He opened the door with every intention of telling Miss Redding to go away and not come back for another hour, but instead of Miss Redding, Millie Bing stood there, a large basket over her arm.

"Good morning," she said brightly. "I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time."

Hans wanted to reply that any time before the sun was fully up was a bad time, but instead, he stepped aside and motioned for her to enter. It wouldn't do to be impolite to the pastor's sister.

"I'm sorry I couldn't make it over sooner—I've been so busy in Bachelor helping Mrs. Dobkins. Her three little ones have had the flu, and with her husband out of town, she needed the extra hands. But I'm here now, and I've brought gifts." She looked around expectantly. "Where are the boys?"

"Still asleep," Hans said. And he hoped they'd stay that way for a little while yet.

"I'll stop by again later, then, and see if I can catch them. In the meantime, let me give you what I brought so I'm not lugging it around with me all day." She gave a little laugh and reached into her basket. "Little boys are always in need of clean shirts, so I found some in the

donation barrel that should suit well." She handed them over. "And I know how much little boys need sweets, so I brought you some horehound. And last but not least, I thought this might come in handy." She pulled out a Bible and set it on top of Hans's growing pile. "In times of sorrow and in times of celebration, the words of the Lord are always appropriate."

Hans couldn't take his eyes off the cover. "Thank you," he said, clearing his throat. "Peter . . . Peter actually prayed for a Bible last night."

"I'm quite positive that the Lord loves hearing the prayer of children," Millie said. "Not that He listens to the grownups any less, of course, but who could resist such innocent faith?" She walked toward the door. "I'll stop by again later so I can meet your little nephews. I've got several errands to run while we're in town today and I'd best get on them."

"When you come, you'll find a new arrival here," Hans said, feeling as though he should give the pastor's sister a heads-up about the strange woman she was going to discover in his house. "Her name is Miss Redding, she just moved here, and she's helping me with the boys for the day."

"Oh, that's just wonderful," Millie said. "I'm delighted to hear there's yet another woman in town, and what a blessing that she can be of help to you."

"Um, yes. A blessing," Hans replied.

"Well, you have a good morning." Millie let herself out through the front door. Hans followed and made sure it was closed snugly, then leaned against it. It was true that there were far more men than women in Creede and he was sure those who lived there would like more companionship, but he was of the opinion that more women weren't necessarily a good thing.

Chapter Eight

“Surprise!” Mrs. Gladstone opened the door to Mariah’s room after a quick knock. “I got it finished!”

Mariah sat up and rubbed her eyes. “What did you finish?”

“Your skirt!” The woman held it up, grinning. “Let me tell you, dear, what a relief it is to have a sewing machine after all my years of using a needle and thread. When I was a girl, you weren’t fully dressed unless you had dozens of yards of petticoats, and every one of them were hemmed by hand. Oh, gracious. Hours upon hours of stitching until I thought I’d go mad.”

Mariah climbed out of bed and touched the fine fabric of the purple skirt Mrs. Gladstone held. “Oh, it’s lovely. You do such beautiful work.”

“Pish-posh,” she said, although she looked pleased. “It was easy as pie. Now, you’d better get ready for the day, my dear. I have a feeling this one will wear you ragged.”

“I don’t know if I should wear a new skirt if I’m going to have such a difficult day,” Mariah began, but Mrs. Gladstone waved her off.

“I made this especially for today. Now, get moving—the cook is making you something special.”

Mariah washed up and pinned her hair carefully, then put on her new skirt. She couldn’t help it—she twirled around just to see it poof. It was perfect.

“I love it, Mrs. Gladstone,” she said when she came downstairs.

“And you look like a dream.” Mrs. Gladstone ushered her over to the table. “Poached eggs with hollandaise sauce, gingered pears, and hot buttered toast. I know you’ll be making breakfast for your new little charges, but you need something on your stomach before you head out on your first day.”

“Thank you, and thank you to Cook, too. This looks wonderful.” Mariah slid into her chair and spread the napkin across her lap. She hoped she’d be able to eat more than a few bites—it really did smell delicious, but she was nervous for some reason, and her nerves always

showed up in her stomach.

"I'm sending a basket along with you—I always buy more than I need, and you might find some ingredients helpful today." Mrs. Gladstone bustled around, her skirts swishing as she walked. "You never really can have too much thyme and rosemary, and where did I put that sage?"

Mariah smiled as she tried a bite of pear. Mrs. Gladstone was doing everything she could to ensure the day went well, but in the end, it all came down to Mariah herself. If she could somehow manage to impress the blacksmith, she'd have a place. And if she didn't . . . well, she supposed it meant she'd head back to Kentucky. At least there, she knew what kind of life she could plan to have. If she went farther west, she had no guarantees.

By the time Mrs. Gladstone had finished packing up her basket, Mariah had eaten a reasonable amount and felt that she would keep it down. A glance at the clock told her that she had just enough time to walk to the forge before she'd be late.

"Thank you, Mrs. Gladstone," she said, picking up the basket as well as the things she'd chosen out to bring. "I'll see you tonight."

"Good luck, my dear," her hostess said. "Have a wonderful day."

As Mariah walked the short distance to Main Street, she schooled her breathing. She needed to be calm. There was nothing to taking care of small children—she could do this in her sleep. That was exactly right, and it wasn't the children making her so nervous, she realized. It was a tall, strong blacksmith with eyes that smoldered more than the fire in his forge.

She gave a few knocks on the door when she arrived, and it flung open to reveal two little boys standing on the other side. "You came! You came!" Peter shouted. "Uncle Hans says we shouldn't call you the lady from the train anymore, but that you have a real name."

"I do have a real name," she said with a chuckle. "Where is Uncle Hans?"

"Here," a deep voice rumbled from behind the door, and her cheeks instantly went hot. If she'd known he could hear her, she wouldn't have been so familiar with him.

“I hope I’m not late, Mr. Jensen,” she said, hoping to recover some dignity.

“Not at all. Have a good day. I’ll be out in the forge.” He moved to go.

“Wait!” She didn’t know why she called out except that she wasn’t ready for him to leave just yet. She wanted him to stay for a moment, talk to her, maybe have a real conversation with her that wasn’t held over a fire or laced with anger.

“Yes?” He paused. “What do you need?”

“Do . . .” She scrambled around in her brain, trying to come up with an excuse to make him stay. “Do the boys have a routine I should know about?”

“They haven’t been here long enough to establish any sort of routine,” he said. “They’re expecting their breakfast, so that had better come first, I should think.” With that, he disappeared, and a second later, she heard what she assumed was the connecting door to the forge close with a solid thunk.

Well, that certainly hadn’t gone how she’d hoped. She turned to the boys. At least they were already dressed, so they could skip that part. “Are you hungry?”

“Yes!” Peter shouted, and Preston nodded.

“Well, I’ve never been inside this house before, so I’ll need you to show me where everything is, all right? In fact, I’m going to need lots and lots of help today.”

“We helped our mama all the time ’cause bein’ a mama is hard work,” Peter told her.

She smiled. “Yes, it is, and I’m so glad you helped her. Can you show me where the kitchen is?”

Peter marched off, glancing over his shoulder to make sure she was following. Preston snuck his little hand into hers and tugged on it, and her heart melted. She allowed him to lead her down the hall to the kitchen, and then she paused and took everything in.

Well, now.

It wasn’t the worst kitchen she’d ever seen. It also wasn’t the cleanest or the best made. Everything was constructed of weathered

wood, even the walls, and it wouldn't look truly clean even after a good scrubbing. She wondered what Mr. Jensen would think if she went over everything with some coats of whitewash. Then again, she only had one day here to prove herself—she'd better prioritize or she'd make a terrible impression.

There was an ice box in the corner, a good stove—she supposed that a blacksmith would take things like that into consideration—and some long working surfaces. This was doable.

A peek in the icebox revealed a few eggs and some milk. She found flour and baking powder, and within minutes, she was mixing up some flapjacks.

"Uncle Hans doesn't know how to make stuff," Peter informed her. "He opens lots of tins instead."

It seemed that Mariah was going to learn all Uncle Hans's secrets whether she wanted to know them or not. "But he has flour and baking powder on hand," she pointed out.

"Only 'cause the lady at the store said he had to have some so we wouldn't die of starvination. What's starvination?"

"It means being very hungry, and I think you mean 'starvation.'" Mariah tested the griddle, then poured some batter on it. "Let's set the table, all right? Where are the plates kept?"

Peter pointed to a shelf, and Mariah gathered what she needed. "Oh, dear," she said, looking at the dishes she held. There was still some residue on them from a greasy meal at some point in the past. "I think we'll take a moment and wash up some dishes. The two of you look like my perfect dish helpers."

She didn't pour out any more batter until all the dishes she could find in the kitchen had been given a good scrubbing. There weren't many to find, so that task didn't take very long. Once she felt comfortable with the state of the dishes, she went ahead and finished cooking up the flapjacks, placing a nice stack before each boy, and asking them to stay put for a moment.

She drizzled syrup over the top of the third plate she'd prepared, poured some hot coffee into a freshly washed cup, and headed over to the connecting door. There, she paused. She couldn't hear the sound

of hammer on metal, but she couldn't see what actually was going on, so she'd have to hazard a guess that it was a good time for her to make a food delivery.

She set down the coffee mug, opened the door, and stepped through. Mr. Jensen was deep in conversation with Mr. Clay, the man who had intervened when that horrible Mr. Grady told her to come apply at the saloon. She thought about retreating, but Mr. Clay saw her and waved her in.

"I brought Mr. Jensen some breakfast," she said, balancing both food items. "Are you hungry, Mr. Clay?"

"No, thank you," he replied. "My wife made a fine spread this morning. Have you met Sophia?"

"I haven't. I've only been here a few days, and I'm afraid I've only met a few people."

"I'll send Sophia over. She'll be glad to know of another woman in town."

Mr. Jensen made an odd kind of grunting noise that Mariah chose to ignore. "I can have that mended for you by the end of the day, Otto," he said, and Mr. Clay nodded.

"Thanks, Hans," he said. He gave a nod to Mariah, and then he was out the door.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," Mariah said, feeling the awkwardness of the situation. "I just have some breakfast for you."

He nodded. "Set it there on the table. And next time—if there is a next time—just save me some in the house and I'll come in and eat when I have a moment."

She nodded. That made sense. "I'll do that with your lunch."

He didn't give another reply, but just bent back to studying the metal hasp Mr. Clay had brought by, and she returned to the kitchen.

After she cleaned up the breakfast dishes, she walked through the house and took a quick look at all there was to be done. She supposed she should have expected what she saw, but it was still rather sobering to see how a man could survive living on his own. Everything was just a bit dingy. She touched a curtain and noticed the gray—it looked as though the smoke from the forge was discoloring the house.

It made her wonder if there was a way to divert the smoke out of the building differently.

The first thing she could clearly see was a lack of clean clothing. She felt a bit sneaky as she wandered around, looking for evidence that she was right, but she figured it was part of her job. Well, looking around was part of her job—the sneaking part not so much.

Back down in the kitchen, she looked around for a washtub. How could someone do laundry without a washtub? Perhaps that was part of the problem. She'd use the bathtub instead—she knew how to make do when circumstances weren't ideal.

"All right, boys," she said, clapping her hands together. "We're going to play treasure hunt. Bring me all the laundry you can find."

Chapter Nine

A lack of a washtub was not the only thing that kept Mariah from leaping right into her task. There didn't seem to be any laundry soap, either, and an investigation of the backyard revealed no clothesline.

"This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen," she said, throwing her hands up in exasperation. "Boys, we're going over to the mercantile."

Peter cheered, and Preston looked hopeful. "Have we done enough work to earn some lemon drops?" Peter asked. "Uncle Hans says we hafta earn them."

"I think you've been very good helpers," Mariah said. "Let's get some, and we'll eat them after lunch, all right?"

The boys seemed to think that was an acceptable compromise, and off they went. When they stepped out the front door, Mariah made sure she had a tight hold on their hands, and they made it to the store in safety.

"Well, hello there," Toria said as they entered. "How are you all today?"

"We're here for lemon drops, please," Peter said importantly.

"And laundry soap," Mariah added.

Toria smiled. "I can help with both." She helped Mariah locate a box of powered soap, along with a length of rope and some clothespins. "So you found a job, then?" she asked as she put the clothespins in a sack.

"We're on a trial basis for today," Mariah replied. "He's not entirely convinced that he needs a housekeeper yet."

"I'm sure you'll change his mind after today." Toria placed everything in a larger sack. "I'll just put these on Mr. Jensen's account," she said with a wink. "And I have it on good authority that someone's paying his account for him this month, so if there's anything else you need . . ."

Mariah turned and glanced around. "I should probably get some coffee—I used up the last this morning. And perhaps more sugar."

Toria added those to the ledger. While she was placing the additional items with the first, Mariah overheard a conversation from the next aisle over.

"I told you, I hate green beans," a man's voice said. "They are an abomination to all that is good and holy about vegetables."

"There's nothing good and holy about vegetables. They're just food!" a woman retorted.

"That's Reverend and Mrs. Theodore," Toria whispered across the counter. "Newlyweds . . . but not under the usual circumstances."

"I thought we agreed that we would try acting civilly to each other, at least in public," the man said.

"Fine! Just . . . fine. How do you feel about carrots, *darling*?"

"Carrots are a much more pleasant vegetable, my *dear*."

The two rounded the aisle and saw Toria and Mariah staring at them. "We'll take a bag of carrots, please," the woman said. She was a pretty dark-haired thing, but the expression on her face kept her from being truly beautiful—she looked like she wanted to beat her husband to death with those carrots rather than eating them.

"Of course," Toria said. She slid Mariah's box toward her. "Here you go. The lemon drops are in the small bag on top."

"Thank you," Mariah told her, nodding at the boys to follow her.

As they left, she heard the woman say, "My lord and master has not yet shared his thoughts about turnips."

"I don't have any thoughts about turnips, my angel."

"Those people didn't sound very nice to each other," Peter observed as they walked back to the forge. Mariah had them hold on to the sides of her skirts, since her hands were busy carrying the box.

"They might just be having a hard day," Mariah replied. She had no idea why the newlyweds were so irate with each other, but she imagined there was a story attached.

"When my mama and papa had a hard day, sometimes they got grumpy, but they never sounded like that." Peter jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "I thought people were tapposed ta sound in love."

"It would be nice if everyone sounded in love, wouldn't it?" Mariah carried the box into the house and set it on the table.

Gathering up the laundry and preparing to begin the wash had taken quite a lot of the morning. She'd have just enough time to get some clothes soaking before it would be lunch.

"My mana always sounded in love," Peter said wistfully. "She sang songs and told us stories."

Preston nodded solemnly.

Mariah looked down at the two little boys. They'd only been in Creede for a couple of short days, and their parents had been killed just before that. These were children who were at the very beginning of their grieving.

"I tell you what," she said. "We're going to start soaking these clothes, and then while I make you lunch, I want you to tell me all your best stories about your mama and papa, all right? I want to know all about them."

"Really?" Peter asked.

"Really," Mariah replied. "Let's get to work, and then it's story time."

Hans knew he was just being stubborn when he left the flapjacks and coffee sit until they were cold. He told himself that he was a very busy man and that he wasn't going to drop everything he was doing because Miss Redding decided to interrupt him, but truth be told, he wasn't all that busy. Otto's repair would take twenty minutes, and he could easily do it after he ate, but no. He was going to prove himself right, so he did the repair and then picked up the food. It was good, even though it was cold, and he wondered what it would have tasted like if he'd eaten it hot.

He walked over to the livery and took Otto his part, then returned to the forge and looked over the work he had remaining. The link in the chain would take a bit more work, and he'd do that after he brought in more coal and refilled his water buckets. He set about doing the work of maintaining the forge, cleaning ash and making sure he had laid out his tools where they went. After that was done, he decided he could go inside and have some lunch before beginning his larger projects.

When he opened the door to the house, he was hit in the face by a wet shirt that had been strung up across the entryway. “What in the world?” he growled as he pulled it away from his head. “Miss Redding, what’s the meaning of this?”

Rope had been strung around the kitchen, and wet clothes were pinned all along the length. “Laundry?” he asked, although it seemed like a silly question. He’d ask a better one. “Why is laundry hanging all over the house?”

Miss Redding turned from the stove. “Well, you don’t seem to have a line outside, and I’m not quite tall enough to tie the rope to the trees or to drive nails into the eaves. Maybe you’d like to take a moment and help me with that before you go back to work.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. “I don’t have a clothesline because I send my laundry out.”

“Ah. I wondered. Well, you can continue to do that, or you can keep the laundry here at home and pay me what you were paying your laundress. That might solve one of your budget concerns.”

He opened his mouth again, ready to argue with her logic, but again, he couldn’t. “I’ll keep that in mind. Where are the boys?”

“Having a rest upstairs.”

He blinked. “They take naps?”

“Oh, no. Not naps. They’re far too old for naps,” she replied. “They have rests. That’s when you lie down and close your eyes, but you don’t have to go to sleep. You just wait until your eyes are ready to open again.”

He sat down on one of the kitchen chairs and regarded her. “Do you have younger siblings, Miss Redding?”

“No, actually, but I minded several neighborhood children as I was growing up. You learn little tips and tricks the more you do it.” She set a bowl of steaming beef stew in front of him, then a plate of corn bread. Then she sat across from him. “So, what do you say? A clothesline before you head back out there?”

He took a bite of stew and thought about it while he chewed. “I can do that.”

“There’s just one thing. It needs to be upwind of your chimneys,

please."

He raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"I noticed that your home is a little dingy, and I believe it's because of the soot from your fire. If we put the clothesline upwind from the chimneys, the clothes would look whiter after they were washed."

He set his spoon down. "May I ask, Miss Redding, how I'm to keep the wind from changing direction once the line is hung up?"

Her eyes grew wide, and she looked at him in astonishment. "I feel so foolish," she said after a long moment. "Of course you can't control the direction of the wind."

"I'm quite flattered, though, that you believed I could," he said.

"I'm not saying I thought you could . . . I just forgot that the wind isn't always constant." She was obviously flustered, and he rather liked it on her. She'd been so sure of herself, so dogmatic, that it was nice to see her floundering a bit.

He decided to take a little pity on her. "I will see if I can find a spot where the house shields the yard from the chimneys somewhat, but there's no way to protect the laundry from the soot entirely," he said. "It's not even possible to get it out of my clothes."

"I noticed that," she replied. "I nearly took the skin off my fingers giving it a try."

"You really shouldn't put that much effort into it. My work clothes will always be stained. I do have nicer things hanging up for church."

"I noticed that," she said, then seemed to regret it instantly. He wasn't too thrilled to hear it, either.

"So, you've taken stock of the house?"

"I felt I had to. Laundry needed to be done and I wasn't sure where you might have tucked all of it, and I had to see to the condition of the bed linens, and—"

He held up a hand. "I understand, Miss Redding. You were doing what you had to. If I take a small bit of offense at it, that's on me, not on you. I should understand that you can't do your job if I'm constantly making it more difficult for you."

"Thank you. That's a much calmer reply than I was expecting."

“Because I’ve been gruff?”

“Because you’ve been gruff.” She nodded toward his food. “Do you like it?”

“What? Oh.” He took another bite and paid attention to it this time. “Yes, I do. Needs a little salt, though.”

She pushed the shaker toward him without a word.

He put some in his bowl, stirred it around, and took another bite. “Perfect.”

“Excellent. Now you know how much salt you need to add to my cooking to suit your tastes.”

He coughed. “Excuse me?”

She gave him a sweet smile. “There should be enough rope left over from what I bought for us to hang up the new line without disturbing this one.”

“And what does that have to do with salt?”

“I never said it had anything to do with salt. I was talking about the laundry.”

“And I was talking about the salt.”

“Which I can plainly see. Let me know when you’re done eating and then let’s go outside and discuss the clothesline.” She stood up and walked back over to the counter, where she picked up a spoon and began stirring something. It looked like dough, but he couldn’t guess what kind. At the moment, he was a little too irate to care. He pushed his chair back from the table.

“I’m done,” he announced.

“Oh, that’s too bad. I’m not quite.” She pulled a muffin tin closer and began putting the mixture into it. “Really, for someone who doesn’t cook, you do have some surprising pans.”

“Surprising?”

“Yes. I’ve found muffin pans, bread pans, skillets—who set up this kitchen for you?”

“Most of it came when I bought the place.”

“Ah, that explains why some of it needs to be replaced.”

He pulled in a deep breath. “Well, which is it? First you say my kitchen is surprising, and then you say it needs to be replaced.”

She slid the muffin tin into the oven, wiped her hands, and smiled at him. “A kitchen can be both surprising and in need of replacement, can’t it?”

He couldn’t keep up with her verbal games. She was simply too much for him. “Let’s go outside,” he said. Changing the subject entirely was going to be the only way he would survive this conversation.

After they discussed it for a few minutes, it was decided that the clothesline would go on the north edge of the backyard. Mariah had to compromise and settle for only partial protection from the wind—the way the house was situated didn't allow for much more than that, and as she looked at the buildings on either side, she realized they were fortunate to have much yard at all. Mr. Jensen strung the line from the eaves on one end and a tree on the other, saying that over the weekend, he'd build a proper clothesline with wooden supports, but this would do in the meantime, and if she would please get the wet clothing out of the house so it wouldn't slap him in the face any longer, he'd appreciate it.

She smiled about that as she lifted the muffins out of the tin and put them on a plate. He wasn't nearly so grumpy as he'd have her believe, but for some reason, it was important to him that he maintain that façade. Why did it matter so much to him? It was as though he was determined to keep that wall up or else. He didn't think she posed any sort of danger, did he? She wasn't going to rob him blind or abscond with the children. Just what was he worried about?

When the boys woke up from their "rest," she gave them each a muffin, then told them they were going to play the cleaning game. Armed with dust cloths, they marched through the house, claiming each surface in the name of their king as they wiped them down. She got nearly as much dust on her hands, face, and up her nose as she did on her cloth, but today would be the worst of it—from here on out, there would only be regular light dusting to do, and that she could manage. That is, if there *was* a here on out. She didn't want to think about the alternative. Now that she was spending time with the boys, she knew just how hard it would be to leave them if this didn't work out.

A knock sounded on the door, and she turned to open it. A bright-eyed, simply dressed young woman stood on the porch, a basket over her arm. "You must be the new arrival in town," she greeted Mariah

enthusiastically. “I’m Millie Bing. My brother is Callum Bing, the reverend over in Bachelor.”

“Oh, hello,” Mariah said, holding the door open so the woman could enter. “I apologize that we’re not quite tidy—we’ve been cleaning all day.”

“Yes, I can see great improvements already. I was here this morning,” she explained at Mariah’s curious look. “I came to meet the boys, and was told about you as well.” She turned to see Peter and Preston standing side by side, holding their dust rags. “Hello there. You must be the children I came to meet. I’m Millie Bing.”

“Like bing cherries?” Peter’s eyes grew wide. “We had a bing cherry tree at our house! You hafta be careful not to swallow the pits, though.” Preston nodded his agreement.

Millie looked concerned. “What happens if you swallow the pits?” she asked.

Peter crooked his finger at her until she stooped down. “You’ll get a bad tummyache, and you’ll spend all day in the outhouse,” he whispered loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear.

“Oh, my. I’ll be sure to be careful next time I eat cherries.” Millie turned to Mariah with a wide smile. “Tell me a little bit about yourself. If you have time, that is. I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Truth be told, I’m about ready for a break.” Mariah sent the boys up to their room to play, then invited Millie to have a seat. She was glad that they’d gotten the front room at least a little bit presentable first. “I’ve come here from Kentucky, actually.”

“I thought I heard something a little different about your accent. Of course, I’m hardly one to speak, am I? My brother and I are Scottish. Seems like folks are coming to the west from everywhere.” Millie lifted her bonnet off her head and placed it on the sofa next to her. “What brought you from Kentucky?”

Much like she had with Mrs. Gladstone on the train, Mariah found herself telling Millie everything, including the near-abduction and the day she’d spent with the boys. Millie gasped and showed appreciation at all the right spots, making her an excellent listener.

“And that’s the short of it,” Mariah said at last. She didn’t give

Mrs. Gladstone's name as her benefactress because she knew the kind woman wanted her generosity to remain anonymous, but she did let Millie know that all her wants were being met, and that she didn't currently stand in need of anything.

"Well, you're here now, and I'm glad of it." Millie patted her hand. "I'd love to take you around and introduce you to everyone. Are you going to be here every day, do you think? I don't believe Mr. Jensen runs the forge on Sundays."

"We haven't decided yet if I'm staying on here," Mariah explained. "This is a one-day trial."

"Just one day? That hardly seems long enough to test out anything. Wouldn't a week give you more of an idea?"

"It was hard enough getting Mr. Jensen to agree to one day," Mariah said with a chuckle. "If I had asked for a week, he would have laughed me to shame."

"What is it with men and their stubbornness?" Millie shook her head. "It seems that they should just accept our innate wisdom and go along with it."

"It would certainly make things easier." Mariah looked down at her hands, then back up. "Are you shocked to hear that I was publicly disavowed by my pastor? As a reverend's sister, that has to be bothering you."

Millie laughed. "If there's one thing that being a reverend's sister has taught me, it's that men of the cloth are still men, and they are prone to making mistakes just like anyone else. I believe you, Mariah. You don't have the air of a brazen woman about you, and I don't see the need for anyone here to know about your sad circumstances. You came for a fresh start—embrace it. You can decide from here who you want to be."

"That sounds so nice," Mariah said. "I'm rather inclined to forget I was ever engaged at all. It wasn't the most pleasant experience."

"I don't believe anyone needs to know. Well, when you're ready to marry, you might want to tell your prospective husband, but no one else. It's simply none of their business."

"That sounds so freeing."

“I hope it is.” Millie stood. “I wish I didn’t have to leave, but Callum will want to head back to Bachelor soon. We come into town every so often to do our shopping and catch up on news, and then we head back before it gets too dark. The road between here and there is a bit treacherous.”

“I appreciate you taking the time to visit with me,” Mariah said as she walked Millie to the door.

“I’m so very glad I came. I have a feeling we’ll be good friends, Mariah Redding.” Millie gave her a quick hug, then exited the house and bustled down the street.

“That lady smells like cookies,” Peter said as he and Preston came down the stairs.

“Do you like cookies?” Mariah asked.

“Oh, yes,” Peter said, his eyes almost rolling in delight. “With applesauce and cimmamomon.”

“I like that kind too,” Maria replied. “We could make some—” She stopped. She shouldn’t say things like that. She was nearly out of time for that day, and she couldn’t promise the boys anything until she’d spoken to Mr. Jensen. “Let’s go check on the clothes,” she said instead, and they went to see if everything they’d hung on the outside line was dry. They carefully put the clothespins back in the sack so they wouldn’t lose any, and they carried in a full basket of clothes that no longer smelled like one hard-working man and two energetic little boys.

Mariah set the table without saying much, feeling the weight of her emotions descend on her as the sun began to go down. She’d found a vase in one of the cupboards and put a straggly little flower from the backyard in it, trying to make things look nicer by setting that in the middle of the table. When Mr. Jensen came in, she had a roast on the table, along with potatoes and carrots, some bread, and a cherry pie.

He paused in the doorway. “I only see three plates on the table. Aren’t you eating with us?”

She shrugged. “It seemed a bit awkward.”

“Well, I’ll feel even more awkward if you don’t, after all your hard

work."

Her heart warmed a bit, and she slid into a chair at the end of the table.

Mr. Jensen ushered the little boys over to wash their hands, which she appreciated, and then they all took their places. He cleared his throat. "Lord, we thank you for this meal and for all our blessings. We thank you for Miss Redding and everything she's done today. Amen."

"Amen," the others chorused.

"You did that really good, Uncle Hans," Peter told him. Then he turned to Mariah. "Uncle Hans didn't know about prayin'. We teached him, though."

"I think you did a fine job with teaching, and your uncle did a fine job with learning," Mariah said with a smile. It was clear that these boys were pushing Mr. Jensen in all kinds of directions that were new to him.

Mr. Jensen cleared his throat again. "Let's just eat, shall we?"

She nudged the salt shaker his direction, and he took it without comment.

Throughout the meal, Peter told their uncle everything they'd done that day, from helping to dunk the clothes in soapy water to learning how to wring them out. "That's the hard part," Peter said with the voice of experience. "It hurts your hands sooo much, but then they feel better afterwards."

Mr. Jensen raised an eyebrow. Mariah was getting rather used to that expression. It meant that he had something to say, and that she probably wasn't going to like it. She gave him a benign look in return. If he had concerns about his nephews helping with the chores, he was clearly in the wrong and she would explain that to him.

Once the meal was concluded, Mariah washed the dishes and wiped down the table. Then she went to find Mr. Jensen, who was sitting in the front room reading the newspaper, and stood before him with her hands folded demurely.

"I've done everything that we agreed I should do, and then some," she said. He hadn't lowered the paper yet, so she gave a delicate cough. "Mr. Jensen?"

“Hmm?” He peered around the edge of the paper. “Oh, Miss Redding. It’s you.”

“Yes, it’s me. Were you expecting someone else?”

“No. I just thought you might be one of the boys.”

She shook her head. “I wonder that you aren’t losing some of your hearing. Or perhaps you are.”

“I don’t believe I am. Now, what can I do for you?”

“I’m done with my tasks for the day.”

“Ah. Very good.” He moved to raise the paper again, but she snatched it out of his hands.

“Mr. Jensen, we need to talk. Am I going to keep working for you or not? Are you satisfied with the things I’ve done today?”

He seemed to think it over. “Why don’t you come back tomorrow and we’ll give it another go?” Then he raised the paper again, leaving her befuddled.

He wanted another trial day? That hardly seemed fair. “If I return tomorrow, it will be at full wages.”

“Understood.”

He said nothing more, and she shook her head. Infuriating man.

She said goodbye to the boys, told them she’d see them the next day, and walked home in the twilight, wondering what she was going to do about a certain blacksmith.

“Are the boys in bed?” Otto asked as he stepped into the house.

“Just barely. Peter couldn’t stop talking about everything they’d done with Miss Redding all day. Who knew that housework was so exciting?” Hans led the way to the main room, and Otto took the seat by the window that nearly had his name written on it for all the evenings he’d spent there. Those nights had tapered off since Otto had gotten married, but he still came by and checked on his friend, and Hans knew he was always welcome for dinner.

“If they helped their mother with housework, maybe it gives them something familiar to hang on to,” Otto suggested.

“Maybe so.” Hans folded up his newspaper and put it on top of the small table next to his chair. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d

been so tidy with his paper, but the room was so fresh and clean now, it seemed a shame to dirty it up.

Almost as if reading his thoughts, Otto looked around. “Things have certainly improved in here,” he said.

“Yes, Miss Redding did a good job.”

“And . . . what do you think of her?” Otto prodded when Hans didn’t elaborate.

“She’s thorough and competent.” Hans paused. “She’s also the most infuriating woman I’ve ever met in my life. She’s smart—she can twist a conversation around until you don’t know if it’s coming or going. She kept me hopping every minute I was around her, and that wasn’t even very much because I was in the forge all day, but I was exhausted by the time she left.”

Otto laughed. “That sounds about right.”

“Right? What do you mean?”

Otto crossed one leg over the opposite knee. “I think you should stop considering Miss Redding as merely your housekeeper and start thinking about her as your prospective wife.”

Hans nearly choked. “Excuse me? Wife?”

“That’s what I said.”

Hans leaned back. “How many years have you known me, Otto? And in all that time, how many women have you seen me chase?”

“None, and that’s exactly my point. It’s time, Hans. It’s time.”

Hans shook his head. “It was the right thing for you—Sophia was a godsend in your life. But me?” He laughed without humor. “No. I . . . no.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever understood your aversion to the fairer sex,” Otto replied. “Just what is it about something in a dress that sends you scrambling for the hills?”

Hans shook his head at his friend’s hyperbole. “I’m not averse to them,” he said. “I just don’t see the need for one in *my* life.”

“And that would be . . . why?”

Hans let out an exasperated sigh. He wasn’t going to get out of this easily, was he? “I was engaged once.”

“You were?” Otto leaned forward, looking eager for a story.

“When was this?”

“I was eighteen, and so was she. We’d known each other nearly our whole lives and it was just assumed by everyone, including us, that we’d get married someday. I’d walked her home from school every day since we were ten, and I saved her from the grasshopper that jumped into her lunch pail and I picked her first for games at recess—little things like that. I officially asked her when we were eighteen and she officially said yes, and then Simon Jones moved to town, and that was that.”

“Oh? Who was this fellow?”

Hans shook his head, still irritated. “He was a fast talker and a nice dresser, and Jean took one look at him and was done for. She called off our engagement about a month later and was married to Simon two weeks after that. She told me that she’d always love me, but there was something about Simon that she couldn’t deny.” He could still see her face when she said that, too, apologizing and justifying herself at the same time. “She’d never had a chance to spend time with anyone else and make sure I was the one she really wanted. Maybe if she had, things would have ended up better for us—I don’t know.”

Otto nodded. “So you’re running from a broken heart.”

Hans shifted in his chair. “I was at first. I stayed around home a short time longer, but couldn’t bear the pitying looks of everyone in town, and that’s when I came here and set up on my own. Now I’m not running anymore, but I’m sure not looking to go through that experience again.”

“So, because Jean left you high and dry, you expect that every woman will do the same?”

Hans shrugged. “I’d just rather not take the chance.”

Otto chuckled. “You might not be running anymore, but you’re definitely hiding. Not every woman is a Jean, Hans.”

“And not every woman is a Sophia,” Hans pointed out. “I don’t think true love is as common and easy to find as you’re making it out to be.”

“And I don’t think it’s as complicated and impossible as *you’re*

making it out to be." Otto stood up and stretched. "It's getting late and I need to go, but just think about it, would you? She obviously loves the boys, and she's doing a good job taking care of the house. And you've got to admit, she's awfully pretty." With a nod, Otto left and pulled the door closed behind him, leaving Hans alone to ponder his words.

Yes, Miss Redding was pretty. No one could deny that for a second. But that didn't make her wife material. Neither did her passable cooking or her obvious skills with cleaning and organizing. Or the way the boys adored her, or the way she could keep Hans on his toes, or the way he'd genuinely looked forward to coming in from the forge that day because he knew he'd be seeing her . . .

He shook his head and stood up. Ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. Otto was just feeling sentimental because he'd been married recently and obviously felt that meant everyone in the world should also get married. It was a strange phenomenon, one Hans had noticed over and over again—as soon as a person got married, they felt it was their job to marry off everyone else around them. "I'm perfectly fine as I am," he said aloud, as if that would make the words more true.

As he left the front room, he walked past the shelf where he'd tucked the Bible Millie had given him, and he paused. He'd forgotten to tell the boys he had it, and they'd been so busy talking about Miss Redding that they hadn't asked about it. He'd show it to them the next day. He rested his hand on the cover for a minute, then climbed up the stairs to find his bed. Prayers were answered—he'd seen enough evidence of that to believe it—but that didn't mean Miss Redding had been sent to him or was meant to be or any of those other silly things. He was a bachelor and always would be. That's just how it was.

Chapter Eleven

"I'm flat-out exhausted, but it was a good day," Mariah said as she sank into the chair in Mrs. Gladstone's parlor. "The boys are fun to watch over, and we got along well. The house is in rather terrible shape, but we made a dent in it today, and I've been asked to come back tomorrow. Just tomorrow, though—he's making no long-term commitment. I think the silly man believes he's getting the upper hand with that little mind trick."

"But he's not," Mrs. Gladstone replied.

"Of course he's not. But I'll let him think that he is for the time being." Mariah pulled some pins out of her hair and rubbed her scalp. The tension from the day had built up in her head, and she couldn't wait to lie down and relax. She couldn't disappear upstairs before she'd told Mrs. Gladstone all about her day, though. That would be a very rude thing to do to a woman who enjoyed hearing stories as much as her hostess did.

"So, what do you think of our blacksmith?" Mrs. Gladstone asked.

Mariah sighed. How could she even begin to try answering that question? "He's different," she said at last. "He's gruff and he's stubborn, and yet he's tender with the boys. He's actually quite enjoyable to talk to—when he's not being completely impossible. I think we could work well together if he could stop seeing me as some sort of interloper."

"Do you have any idea why he feels that way about you?"

"None whatsoever. There's just this sense that he's created his own little kingdom and he can't abide having anyone else in the castle. He's made an exception for the boys, of course, but I'm not included on that list of elite persons."

"Is that because of your gender, or because you're new in town?"

"I really don't know. Possibly both. It would be rather odd, though, if I were a man offering to work as his housekeeper, so I would think that my gender would be something in my favor."

"Very true," Mrs. Gladstone said with a chuckle as she hoisted

herself out of her chair. “Do you need any dinner?”

“No, thank you. Mr. Jensen insisted that I eat with him and the boys. Thank you, by the way, for the basket you sent with me this morning. I used the cherries to make a pie, and the boys gobbled it right down.”

“I’m so glad,” the woman replied, beaming. “There’s nothing quite so satisfying as feeding hungry people. And speaking of that, if you’re sure you’re not hungry, I’ll tell Cook that she’s done for the night.”

“I’m very well satisfied. Thank you.”

After bidding Mrs. Gladstone goodnight, Mariah climbed the stairs to her room and flung herself across the bed before she’d even bothered to unfasten her shoes. Images floated through her mind—filling the bathtub with soap and showing the boys how to submerge the clothes, watching Preston’s face when he put a lemon drop in his mouth, listening to Peter talk about their mother.

Oh, how her heart ached for those children. Peter had painted the most wonderful picture of a perfect childhood just with his few simple words. She was sure that they had both good days and bad in their family—everyone did—but he and his brother had been truly loved, and to lose that kind of love so harshly must have been a horrible shock. Yet they were soldiering on as best as they could, and she loved them all the more for it.

She sat up and finished taking the pins out of her hair, then grabbed her brush. Mr. Jensen . . . he was everything she’d told Mrs. Gladstone—and more. She hadn’t said a word about how he made her heart beat faster whenever he stepped into the house. Or the way his rare smiles made her cheeks feel hot. She had no right to be reacting to him the way she was, like a sixteen-year-old girl on a picnic with the most handsome boy in school. If she wasn’t careful, she’d start giggling at everything he said, and that would most certainly never do. It was better to keep him at a little bit of arms’ length—he had no intention of being anything more to her than an employer, if that, and she’d be much better off keeping her feelings locked away.

She was afraid, though, that it was already too late.

The next morning, Mariah set the next batch of laundry to soak in the tub and put some bread dough out to rise. Then she took off her apron and turned to the boys. “We have about an hour to do anything we want before our next jobs,” she told them. They’d been working so hard, they deserved a break. So did she, for that matter. “Let’s go for a walk.”

They left the house and walked down the street. Mariah wondered if there are any spots in town that would be good for picnics, or if they’d have to drive out of town to find any. She was becoming rather curious about places like Bachelor and Topaz—she’d heard them mentioned and would like to know more about them, but she supposed that going visiting would happen all in good time. For now, the important thing was getting herself established in Creede, and then she could branch out a bit.

She was half listening to Peter tell her about a bird he’d seen on a branch a moment ago when a horse came up alongside them and kept pace with them. She glanced up to see the man who had nearly run over the boys two days before. He tipped his hat and gave her a smile.

“How is everyone today?” he asked.

“Quite well,” she replied. “And yourself?”

“Much the same.” He slid off his horse and took up its bridle, walking next to Mariah. “I’m so glad to run into you. I’ve been feeling foolish ever since the other day—I never introduced myself. My name is Sterling McCormick.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. McCormick. I’m Mariah Redding, and these fine boys are Peter and Preston Smith.”

Mr. McCormick tipped his hat again, and Preston gave a little wave. “A pleasure, Miss Redding. Are you the caretaker for these young men, then?”

“Yes, for the time being. You might say that you helped bring that about.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. After they ran out into the street, I took their uncle to task and pretty much demanded that he hire me.” They both laughed. She liked the sound of his laugh—it was warm and rich. “So yes, I do have

you to thank."

"I'm glad I could be of service," he said, sounding amused. "More than anything, though, I'm so glad the children are all right."

She glanced down at them, trotting along on their short little legs. "So am I, Mr. McCormick."

He paused, bringing his horse to a stop. "Miss Redding, I realize this is quite forward, considering that we've only just met, but I'd like to get to know you a bit better. You've been on my mind these last few days, and not only because of the boys."

"I have?" That was flattering and befuddling all at the same time.

"You have. Would you consider riding out with me sometime? We could take the boys along as chaperones, if you'd like. Maybe a picnic?"

She grinned, looking up into his eyes. Oh, those were very nice eyes—brown with flecks of gold. "I was just thinking about a picnic. How did you know?"

"I think there's something about this nice warm spring weather that inspires picnics in all of us. What do you say? I have tomorrow afternoon free."

She looked down at the boys. They'd love a picnic—she was sure of it. She couldn't make any promises on their behalf unless she'd spoken with their uncle, though she could speak on her own behalf. "I'd enjoy that, Mr. McCormick. If the boys aren't able to come along, I'll need to arrange another day, but yes, I'm definitely interested."

"Excellent." He smiled, and he did seem genuinely pleased that she'd said yes. "Assuming that you're able to come tomorrow, where shall I pick you up?"

"Well, assuming that I'm able to come, you can pick me up at the small house adjacent to the forge."

He nodded. "All right, then. I'll stop by in the morning and you can tell me your plans, and we can go from there. Thank you, Miss Redding. You've given me something to look forward to."

"I think I'll look forward to it as well," she replied.

He gave her a slight bow, turned to the boys and did the same, then mounted his horse again and rode off. She hadn't looked at him

much on the day of the incident because her entire focus had been on calming the boys, but she had to say, he was a very good-looking man. She'd say he was around twenty-eight years old, perhaps, with the air of a man who was fully comfortable with himself and his place in the world. He was dressed nicely, but not ostentatiously. She'd guess that he was well off, but that he didn't do things for show. She liked that in a man.

A tug on her skirt brought her back to the present. "Are we going on a picnic?" Peter asked.

"Yes, we are. We might go with Mr. McCormick, or we might go ourselves—we'll talk to your uncle and see what he says. Either way, we're definitely going on one."

"Hooray," Peter shouted. "We love picnics. Don't we, Preston?"

His little brother nodded.

"Let's turn down this street and head back now," Mariah said. "It's almost time to take care of the bread and the laundry." Plus, she didn't hesitate to admit to herself, she wanted to talk to Mr. Jensen about the following day. There was something fascinating about Mr. McCormick, and she couldn't wait to discover what that might be.

A little voice in the back of her head reminded her about the feelings she'd begun to develop for Mr. Jensen, but she reminded that voice that it was best for her not to get involved. Mr. McCormick might be just what she needed to distract herself.

Hans scowled at Miss Redding across the lunch table. She'd just asked him if she could take his nephews on a picnic the following day —a picnic, she added casually, being hosted by a Mr. McCormick, the same man who had nearly run the boys down on his horse the other day. Of course, he realized that had been an accident, but he wasn't at all amused by the fact that the man now wanted to take them on an outing. Was he trying to make an apology of sorts? Would he sooth his guilty conscience and then go away? From the little pink rosy parts on Miss Redding's cheeks, Hans had to think there was something more to it than that, and he wasn't sure that he liked the idea.

In all honesty, though, he had no reason to tell her no. She didn't

officially work for him—she was still on the ridiculous trial basis that he himself had insisted on, and he didn't have any right to keep her from enjoying herself. His only real claim was to his nephews, and he couldn't see that they'd come to any harm. This Mr. McCormick would likely do everything he could to make a good impression on Miss Redding, and that would include treating the boys well.

Hans looked down at his bowl and took a bite of chicken stew. Miss Redding had added more salt to the dish than she had with her cooking the day before, and he hadn't needed to add any. That was almost disappointing—he'd enjoyed their little salt tug-of-war. He'd enjoyed almost everything about the time he'd spent with her—except for the exasperating parts, of course.

"Mr. Jensen?"

He looked up and realized that she'd been waiting for his answer for quite a while now. "Um, yes, that should be all right," he said at last.

"I'll leave you some lunch in the ice box so you won't miss us too terribly," she added.

"Thank you." It wouldn't be the lunch that he'd miss, though.

He finished his food and thanked her for it, then headed back out to the forge. He had two horses to shoe, and that would keep his hands busy. Unfortunately, the task was so routine that his mind would be free to wander while he worked, and he had no doubt that it would be wandering to Miss Redding and to this Mr. McCormick fellow. He didn't know why, but the idea of her having a suitor annoyed him to no end.

“Oh, no. Oh, dear.” Mariah had only turned her back for a moment, and in that moment, Preston had decided to be extra helpful by lifting the flour sack off the counter. It had upended, and now the boy and the floor were both coated in white.

Preston’s bright eyes shone through the mess. He seemed frozen, as if he didn’t know how to react, and stood there like a statue.

“Don’t be mad, Miss Redding!” Peter begged. “Please don’t be mad.”

Mr. Jensen stepped into the kitchen just then. “What’s going on?”

“Preston was just tryin’ to help,” Peter said. “He didn’t mean to spill.”

“Do you know what I think?” Mariah said, folding her arms across her stomach.

“What?” Peter asked, sounding fearful. Preston hadn’t taken his eyes from her.

“I think Preston looks like a snowman.” Mariah reached out and grabbed a carrot from the counter. She held it up to his nose, then looked at him critically. “Yes, he’s definitely a snowman.”

Preston giggled.

“I’ve got some coal out in the forge,” Mr. Jensen offered.

“Get it! Get it!” Peter hollered.

Mariah shook her head with a smile, glad that Mr. Jensen had gotten into the spirit of the thing. There was something obviously troubling the boys, and she wanted to get to the bottom of it. She picked up a dish towel and began dusting off Preston’s face. “You need a bath, but I’ve got your blankets soaking in the bathtub right now, so you’ll have to wait a little bit, all right?”

He nodded.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Mr. Jensen grab the broom and began sweeping. She nearly objected, but she realized that he was just trying to be helpful, and so she let him. “Why did you think I’d be upset?” she asked Peter casually as she continued dusting

flour from Preston's shoulders.

"We're not tapposed ta waste food," Peter explained. "Flour costs a lot of money."

Ah. That made sense. The boys' parents probably didn't have much, and to lose a whole sack of flour would likely ruin their food budget for the week. "It's hard when you don't have money," she said, maintaining her casual tone. "Mamas and papas like to be sure they can take care of their children, and sometimes, they worry, and that makes them seem angry."

Peter nodded. "Mama worried a lot sometimes."

Mariah glanced over at Mr. Jensen. His lips were set in a firm line as he swept. He wasn't doing a very good job and she'd want to go over it again when he was done, but she was glad that he had something to occupy himself during what was likely an awkward conversation.

"I think it's just because she wanted to make sure you had enough," she said to Peter. "We'll clean this up and we'll get more flour, and we won't worry about it. I do think that the grownups should be the ones to lift the flour from now on, though. What do you think?"

Both boys nodded.

Once the first layer of flour had been dusted off Preston's clothes, she had him go outside, where she ruffled his hair until it was mostly clean, and then she had him change. He'd definitely still need a bath, but he could now wait until the blankets were on the line. She sent the boys upstairs to play and prepared to rinse the laundry.

"I didn't realize," Mr. Jensen said, and she paused. "I didn't realize how poor they were."

"You couldn't have known," she hurried to say, but he continued as though she hadn't spoken.

"When I moved away, I cut my ties and didn't look back except for occasional letters. If I'd stayed in touch, I would have known, and I could have helped." He tapped the broom on the floor, sending up a small cloud of flour. "There's no reason for a little boy to be scared over such an innocent mistake."

Mariah couldn't help it. She crossed the floor and touched his arm. "He's not scared anymore, Mr. Jensen. We'll make this room look like new, and we'll buy another sack, and he won't even remember it happened."

He nodded. "I've chastised myself so many times over the last few days, but in truth, I can't fix my mistakes of the past. I can only do better from here on out."

She was immediately curious about what he meant by his mistakes, but that was his to share when and if he felt the time was right. "And you will do better," she told him. "Listen—they're playing up there, not feeling sorry for themselves, and not scared anymore." She gave his arm a little squeeze and then stepped back. "You'll be exactly what they need."

"I can't take credit for any of it, Miss Redding. That was entirely your success." He met her gaze with his. "I don't know why I've been so reluctant to see it, but you are needed around here. Would you consider staying on? Again, I can't pay much, but what I have is yours." He looked down, cleared his throat, and tried again. "I mean, we'll make it work."

She smiled. "Yes, Mr. Jensen. We'll make it work, and I'm delighted to stay on."

"That's one thing we need to talk about." He held up his finger. "I think it's time we moved on to given names, don't you? I'm getting tired of all this formality just for custom's sake. Please, call me Hans."

She smiled again, glad he'd brought it up. "And I'm Mariah."

"Mariah! That's it. I knew it started with an M, but I couldn't remember for the life of me." He chuckled. "Welcome to the family, Mariah. Thank you for your help, and I'm sorry I've been so resistant about it. I struggle with pride."

"Oh? I hadn't noticed," she said, sending him an exaggerated grin. "Thank you for your help with the broom, but I'll be fine from here." She reached out to take it, but his fingers were still wrapped around the handle. They stood there, frozen in time, their fingers intertwined, and she thought for sure she'd forgotten how to breathe. Then he let go and stepped back.

"I'll be in the forge," he mumbled, and she watched him go, completely unable to come up with a reply.

When the kitchen door closed, she sank into a chair, trying to understand what had just happened. She'd known she was attracted to him, but this—this went far and beyond anything she'd expected. If he were to send her away now, it would be the cruelest thing he could ever do.

No. Absolutely not. Hans pulled a piece of metal from the fire and began to pound it, releasing the strength of his emotions. He was not going to fall in love with his housekeeper. Otto Clay was responsible for putting the thought in his head, but he didn't have to entertain it. She might be pretty and kind and everything he needed in someone to run his house, but that was it—he was not going to fall for her.

And he wasn't going to keep remembering how their fingers had touched and how her breath had caught and how he'd seen her heart beating in her throat like a butterfly. Or the way his own breathing hitched when he looked down at her. That was all physical and didn't mean anything—he would have reacted that way to any young woman standing in his kitchen who loved his nephews and worked tirelessly for them and had eyes that looked like shimmering pools in the rain.

He brought his hammer down one more time, then wiped his forehead with the back of his arm. He might as well give up—he had no resistance to her, and it seemed foolish to keep up the fight. Otto would be glad to hear it, but there was just one problem—she was going on a picnic the next day with Mr. McFuddyWuddy or whatever his name was. And she seemed to be looking forward to it. He should have been kinder to her from the start. He shouldn't have been so overbearing and stubborn. It would serve him right if she went off and married this other fellow.

No, it would serve him right to take her in his arms and kiss her senseless. That seemed like a much better ending to the story.

He shook his head. He had work to do, and so did she. Tomorrow and the offending picnic would arrive soon enough, and he'd see what

happened. Maybe it would rain. That would be an excellent solution.

"Boys, I have a surprise for you," Hans said after they cleaned their teeth that night. "Go climb in your bed and I'll meet you there in a minute."

Preston, his hair still a little damp from his bath, scampered up the stairs with Peter right behind him. Hans grabbed the Bible from the shelf and joined them. Mariah had washed all the blankets, and their bed was fresh and neat. He'd have to see about making them a bed frame—maybe when he made the supports for the clothesline. He shook his head. He'd promised to get that done, but it had slipped on his list of priorities. He'd just have to push it right back up to the top. Mariah was becoming more important to him by the minute, and if there was something he could do to lighten her burdens, he wanted to do it.

He lowered himself until he was sitting on the edge of their straw tick, then he held up the Bible. Preston's eyes went wide, and Peter's jaw dropped. "You got one!" he shouted. "You're not a heathen anymore!"

Hans laughed. "I'm not sure that's what being a heathen means, but yes, I got one. Actually, do you remember the other night, when you prayed for us to get a Bible?"

"'Course I do," Peter replied confidently. "I remember all my prayers."

"Well, it was the very next morning that we got this one," Hans said. "Miss Bing brought it when she came to see us."

"And now you can read it to us?" Peter asked, his face hopeful.

"And now I can read it to you," Hans replied. It had been a long time since he'd picked up a Bible and he figured it would do him some good as well as the boys, but he did feel just the smallest bit reluctant to delve into it again. The language was sometimes hard for him to understand, and he wasn't sure just how much of the Old Testament content would really be appropriate for such young boys. "What's your favorite part?"

"Preston likes all the sheep stories," Peter said.

Hans felt his mind go blank. “The sheep stories?”

“Yeah. The ones where Jesus takes care of His baby sheep. Those make us feel warm inside.”

Hans turned the book over and over in his hands. “I’m not sure where to find those stories, but I promise you, I’ll ask someone, and we’ll read them tomorrow, all right? In the meantime, how about the story of when Jesus was born?” He could remember where that was well enough—they’d read it every Christmas when he was growing up.

The boys agreed, and he read them those verses. He couldn’t help but remember his sister as he read. She loved those passages in the Bible and would listen to their father read with shining eyes. She loved everything about Christmas. He’d bet she made the holiday a beautiful thing for her boys—when winter came, he’d have to see if he couldn’t pump them for some information and decide how to incorporate their traditions here.

He bet Mariah would love to help.

If she was still there and hadn’t married that picnic person.

He shoved that thought aside, told his nephews goodnight, and left the room. It seemed that was part of his nightly routine—tuck the boys in and then collapse against the wall in the hallway. They sapped every last bit of strength from him, and he was only with them for a short time each day. He could only imagine what Mariah felt like, being with them from breakfast until dinner. She must be absolutely exhausted.

Thinking about her brought a smile to his face. A lock of her hair had slipped from her braid, and he’d wanted with everything inside him to reach out and tuck it into place. Why hadn’t he done it? He imagined that it would feel like silk against his roughened hands.

He could only pray that he’d be given another chance.

Chapter Thirteen

Mariah chose her clothes with special care the next morning. This was her first outing with a man since she'd arrived in town, and she felt the nerves building up inside her. She wondered what colors Mr. McCormick liked best. Immediately on the heels of that thought, though, she wondered what colors Hans liked best. She closed her eyes, then opened them again. She had to keep her growing attraction to Hans under control. It wouldn't do anyone any good for her to be pining over him like a lovesick puppy while she was supposed to be washing the dishes.

And it's not like she actually *was* pining—she wasn't some silly girl who could be so easily swayed by strong arms and charming smiles and sharp wit.

She straightened her shoulders and looked at herself in the mirror. Her hair was done up in a braided bun, and she thought she looked rather well. Now it was up to Mr. McCormick to decide what he thought about her looks.

Mrs. Gladstone was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs, another of her infamous baskets in her hands. "I have more things for the boys," she said, passing the handle over to Mariah. "I just can't help myself."

Mariah laughed. "Neither can half the town. They've stopped bringing in meals since I started working there, but we're still getting baked goods and outgrown clothing and all kinds of things. I don't think those boys are going to want for much."

"You have a nice day, dear," Mrs. Gladstone called after her as she walked down the sidewalk. "Take care."

Mariah unpacked the basket as soon as she arrived at the house, looking for anything that might need to go in the ice box. She found some peppermint candies tucked away in between the tinned peaches, and she smiled. The boys weren't the only ones in town with a sweet tooth, and it was kind of Mrs. Gladstone to share out of her secret stash—a stash that wasn't very secret because Mariah had been shown

both its location and its contents. She didn't know if the boys liked peppermint, but she was willing to believe the answer was yes.

There was a jar of lemonade, which she'd bring along on the picnic. Mr. McCormick had seemed to indicate that he'd be in charge of the food, but an extra beverage was always nice.

Almost as though he knew she'd been thinking about him, he knocked on the door a moment later, and smiled when she greeted him. "Good morning," he said. "I've come to see about our plans for the day. Are you able to come out with me?"

"I am, and the boys are looking forward to it too."

"Wonderful. I'll be by around eleven thirty, if that suits."

"That sounds perfect," Mariah replied, and he gave a tip of his hat before he was off again.

Eleven thirty. That gave her time to chop some vegetables for the soup she'd make later, and also to darn some socks. She was so glad the laundry was caught up, for now—her back ached from her work of the last two days. Washing blankets was her least favorite thing to do in all the world, but it had made her happy, knowing that Hans and his nephews had nice clean beds.

She hadn't seen Hans that morning. He was already out in the forge when she'd arrived, the boys still sleeping peacefully. She didn't know how she was going to look Hans in the eye when he came in for breakfast. The moment they'd shared the day before over something as simple as a broom—she'd thought about it far too much since it had happened, wondering what it would have been like if he'd kissed her, but that was silly. They were handing off a broom—there's nothing romantic about brooms. It had sure felt romantic, though, and her heart wouldn't be convinced otherwise.

She pulled in a deep breath and started some breakfast bread, then pulled out the darning while the oven heated up. The boys came running down a few minutes later, already dressed, just as she'd taught them the first day. Her heart warmed when she saw them. They were such dear little souls, even if they had worn terrible holes in their socks.

She got them fed, then sent them outside to gather wood chips

from around the chopping block. Hans had brought in quite a nice stack of wood, she could see from the box by the stove, and she was sure there were quite a number of chips she could use for kindling. The boys were all too happy to take a basket and go looking.

A moment later, Hans entered the kitchen and stood in the doorway. His hair was damp, and he smelled like soap. She tried not to think about the day before, but he was giving her something close to the same look, and that made her resolve hard to maintain.

"Would you like some coffee?" she asked. "I'll have some hot food on the table in a minute."

"Just coffee, please," he said.

She felt his gaze following her as she moved over to the stove and poured his cup. When she turned to hand it to him, she found that he'd come up behind her, and he took the cup and set it on the counter. He was standing close, so close. She swallowed.

He reached up and touched her cheek, tracing her jawline with his fingertip. "What time is your picnic?" he asked.

"We're being picked up at eleven thirty," she replied, hardly able to speak.

"Hmm." He trailed his finger across her lips. She couldn't take her eyes off his gaze—what was he doing? Well, she *knew* what he was doing, but why? Oh, forget it—it didn't matter why. Her eyes closed of their own accord, and he pulled her in and kissed her.

Her hands came up and grasped his collar, keeping him close until they were both out of breath. When he finally released her, she was a little dizzy, but he kept his arms around her waist. "I just wanted you to know that you have options," he said. Then he let go and stepped back out to the forge, closing the door behind him.

She leaned against the counter, trying to catch her breath. What on earth . . .? Had that really just happened? Oh, yes, it had, and she wouldn't mind it happening again.

Just then, the boys came in through the back door, carrying a basket of wood chips between them. "You got a lot," she said, forcing her voice to sound normal. "Good job."

"There's some more, but the basket was getting heavy," Peter

replied.

"We can get the rest later. Let's get ready for our picnic, all right?" Suddenly, she didn't want to go. How was she supposed to spend the afternoon with Mr. McCormick when she still had Hans's kiss on her lips?

Hans sank down on the stool inside the forge and ran his fingers through his hair. He couldn't believe he'd just done that. He hadn't kissed a woman like that since . . . no, he'd actually never kissed a woman like that. He and Jean were young and naïve, and kissing meant sweet little pecks after some handholding and a stroll in the garden. That—well, he wasn't sure exactly what that was, but it most certainly was not a sweet little peck. He could still feel the way Mariah had completely melted in his arms, accepting every emotion his heart was transmitting. He chuckled to realize that his coffee was still on the counter, but he'd better not go back in there to get it or they might have a repeat performance, this time in front of the children.

"You look like a man with a lot on his mind," Otto observed as he walked into the forge, carrying a couple of chains.

"I have a *lot* on my mind, and you're to blame for all of it," Hans replied. He stood up and held out his hand. "What have you brought me?"

Otto held his arm out and away. "You don't get these until you tell me what's going on."

"Mariah. Miss Redding," he clarified when he saw that his friend didn't know who he meant.

"Ah. So, you've been thinking about what I said." Otto chuckled. "I make a lot of sense, don't I?"

"Not usually, but this time, you do." Hans shook his head. "I just kissed her, Otto. She's getting ready to go on a picnic with some other man, and I couldn't stand the thought of it, and I grabbed her and I kissed her."

Otto nodded, a grin on his face. "Did she slap you?"

"No, sir, she did not. She clung to me like a burr on a blanket.

And now she's getting ready to leave."

"She's still going on the picnic? Are you sure that kiss was as good as you say it was?"

"It was better." Hans ran his fingers through his hair again. "I'm hoping that she's only going because the boys are looking forward to it so much. That would be a good reason, right?"

"Right. Or maybe she doesn't want to hurt this man's feelings. What was his name?"

"Um, McCormick, I think."

Otto chuckled. "I just rented a small buggy out to a Mr. McCormick. Sorry—if I'd known what it was for, I would have refused."

"No, don't worry about it. If Mariah wants to ride off into the sunset with this other fellow, she has every right to." Hans paused. "And if I happen to ride off in the exact same direction and bring her back, I think that's perfectly fair."

"Oh, perfectly," Otto said. He held out his chains. "I've got some weak links here, if you wouldn't mind."

"Of course not." Hans took them and laid them on his table. "It'll keep me occupied while Mariah's out."

Otto shook his head. "I'll look forward to a full report."

"As soon as I have one to give you."

When Otto left, Hans bent to his work, examining the chain. Then he paused and listened—it sounded like Mr. McCormick had arrived for Mariah and the boys. He did truly hope they had a good time. He just also hoped that Mariah could still feel his lips on hers—he was bound to be haunted by the feel of her hands on his collar the rest of the day.

Chapter Fourteen

Mr. McCormick handed Mariah up into the buggy, then gave each of the boys a boost. Then he climbed in himself, and with a flick of the reins, they were off.

"Where are we going?" Mariah asked.

"There's a beautiful little wooded spot just outside of town that has a creek running through it and some fallen logs that will make perfect benches," he replied. "I discovered it while I was out riding around the other day. I'm new to the area, and I like to go exploring whenever I'm in a different place."

He was new to the area? A flash of panic leaped through Mariah's stomach. He wasn't the man who had tried to abduct her from the train station, was he? She pulled in a deep breath. No. Mr. McCormick was the wrong height, and her abductor had seemed broader in the chest. She forced herself to calm down. "Where did you come from, Mr. McCormick?"

"Denver. I'm an architect by trade, and I was asked to come out here and make some suggestions for the rebuilding of Creede. This place has sure been through a lot, but I can foresee a great future for it. Stores of all kinds, people coming here from everywhere—well, who wouldn't want to live in Colorado?" He flung his left arm wide while his right hand maintained a grip on the reins. "I'm excited to be a part of it."

"Have you met with many business owners so far?" she asked.

"Five, and I have more appointments next week. I don't know as that they've all decided to use my ideas, but it's rather flattering that they'd even be considered. There's a Mrs. Jennings who wants to open a haberdashery, and we spent a good hour discussing the possibilities. I think she'll do well—she has a good business head on her shoulders."

Mariah felt herself relaxing even more as they drove. He was a legitimate businessman—she was sure of it now—and she commanded her stomach to stop flipping around like jelly.

After a few more minutes of driving, they reached the little grove

he'd been talking about, and he handed them all down, including a nice, big picnic basket. "I wasn't sure what you'd like to eat, so I asked Mrs. Jackson to put together a variety," he said as he set the basket near the fallen logs. "I made sure she included some gingersnaps," he told the boys with a wink.

The meal was delicious, the company was charming, and the boys enjoyed running around in the trees after they'd eaten. Mariah wished she could fully invest herself in the moment, but she couldn't. All she could do was think about Hans, and she realized with a chuckle that had been his plan all along. He wanted her thinking about him, and he was getting his way.

Mr. McCormick looked at her curiously, and she realized that she had laughed aloud. "Aren't the boys cute?" she asked, trying to make an excuse for her behavior. "They make me laugh all the time with their antics."

"They are," he agreed. "I can see why you're so taken with them. They're quite lucky to have you."

"No, I'm lucky to have them," she replied. "They've filled a hole for me that I didn't even know I had."

Mr. McCormick sat back and regarded her. "And their uncle?" he asked.

Mariah swallowed. "I'm getting to know their uncle more a bit each day, although that's been a little bit of a challenge. He's not as open as most people."

Mr. McCormick nodded. "Miss Redding, I'll be frank with you. I don't know how long I'm in town—I could be here another month, I could move here permanently, or I could be called back to Denver on another job. My plans have no permanence. I find you beautiful and fascinating, and I'd like to get to know you better while I'm here. I had planned to ask if that would be agreeable to you, but I sense that your feelings are drifting in another direction." He nodded to the boys, but she knew that he also included Hans in that equation.

"You're right," she said, giving him a smile. "You're right, but I didn't even know it until about an hour ago. I hope I haven't misled you in any way—that wasn't my intention."

“Not at all. I understand that things can change. I’m glad that we’ve given the boys a chance to experience some wilderness for a few minutes at least.”

“Thank you for bringing us, and for the delicious lunch. You’ve really been too kind,” she told him.

He placed his hand on hers, gave it the smallest squeeze, and then let go. “It was my pleasure.”

Hans was standing outside the forge chatting with someone Mariah hadn’t met when Mr. McCormick delivered her and the boys back home. Mr. McCormick helped them down and wished them well, then drove the buggy off to the livery to return it. Mariah felt bad for the trouble and expense he’d gone through on her behalf, but was relieved to feel that they had parted as friends.

The man Hans was speaking with walked away, leaving Hans standing there alone. He met her gaze with a little smile, and she walked up to him, her hands on her hips. “You’re looking a little smug this afternoon, Mr. Jensen,” she said in a low voice. “I do hope you’re happy with yourself.”

“Happy? Whatever do you mean?”

“You know full well what I mean.” She glanced around to make sure no one was listening. “The entire time I was gone, I couldn’t stop thinking about . . . you know what.”

“Oh? And what was that?” He reached out and gently tugged on a little piece of hair that had fallen loose from her bun. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She glanced down at his lips. That was a bad idea—now he was looking at hers, and they were standing on the side of the street with people bustling around them, and kissing right then would be scandalous, but she’d gotten used to scandal and had decided it wasn’t such a bad thing after all.

“I . . . think it’s time for me to start supper,” she said when the tension was so thick, she couldn’t breathe. Changing the subject was good. “Boys, you can help me roll the pie dough.”

“Hooray! Pie!” Peter jumped up from his spot on the porch steps.

Mariah laughed. That boy would have to be watched or he'd eat nothing but sweets morning, noon, and night. She'd been providing them, though, so she was just as much to blame as anyone.

Just as they were all about to enter the house, Preston let out a cry and began to run toward the street.

"Preston!" Mariah picked up her skirt and began to follow him. Where on earth was he going? He darted between people, around people, behind people—she couldn't keep up. "Preston!" she called out again, terror rising in her chest as she saw him running between horses. He hadn't learned anything from the near miss with Mr. McCormick—he was putting himself in danger yet again.

She redoubled her speed, pushing past men and women who weren't moving out of her way quickly enough. Up ahead, she saw that the stagecoach was unloading, and that seemed to be where Preston was heading. What could he want with the stagecoach?

Just as he neared it, he ran beneath the hooves of one of the horses, and the animal reared back. It came down heavily on its front legs. Mariah reached out, grabbed Preston's arm, and pulled him out of the way just as he surely would have been crushed. She pulled him tightly to her and collapsed on the side of the road, sobbing, her heart thudding painfully against her ribs.

"Mama! Mama!" Preston called out, struggling against her grip.

Peter and Hans dashed up to them just then. "Are you all right?" Hans asked, his eyes darting from one to the other.

"Uncle Hans, Preston thinks that's our mama," Peter said, pointing to a woman who had gotten off the stagecoach and was now claiming one of the bags that was being lowered from the roof.

Hans straightened slowly, his eyes focused on the woman. "Oh, no," he whispered. Then he stooped back down. "Preston, I'm sorry, but that's not your mama."

The boy wouldn't be convinced. Tears streamed down his face as he continued to struggle against Mariah's arms.

"May I?" Hans asked, and Mariah willingly let him take the boy. She watched as he led Preston over to the woman. She couldn't hear what was being said, but she could guess that Hans was introducing

himself and giving Preston the chance to see that she was, in fact, a stranger.

"We never got to say goodbye or nothin'," Peter said. Mariah had almost forgotten he was standing there by her shoulder. "They were just gone one day. The sheriff came and told us. Preston was too little to understand. He thinks they're gonna come back."

"Oh, Peter." Mariah reached around him and gave him a big hug. "You've been such a brave big brother. I bet you miss them too."

A single tear ran down his cheek, but he quickly wiped it away. "I do, but I know they're not coming back."

"And do you know that it's all right to cry about it? You don't have to be brave for Preston every single minute. You can have all the feelings you need to have."

His lower lip quivered. He didn't reply, but his grip around her neck tightened.

Hans came walking back, Preston in his arms. The boy was sobbing as though his heart had just been ripped from his chest. "Mama," he wailed. Mariah held out her arms, and Hans lowered the boy into them. She held him in her lap and rocked back and forth until his sobs had faded into a whimper.

"That very nice lady was kind enough to talk with us for a minute and let Preston see that she wasn't his mother," Hans said, his voice soft. "And I think we have a boy who is finally starting to understand."

Mariah squeezed him just a little closer. She hadn't missed at all how Hans had used the word "we," and she loved it. She wanted to be in their lives. She wanted to do whatever she could to help ease this transition for this family. She wanted to cuddle these boys and be held by that man and even wash the blankets, her most dreaded housekeeping task ever. She wanted all of it so badly that she thought she'd explode from the wanting of it.

When she looked up at Hans, she could see that he wanted it too.

"Would you like to get off the ground now, Miss Redding?" he asked, and she nodded.

"I think that would be very nice. Thank you."

Hans and Mariah gathered the boys together in the front room and they talked for a long time. Peter shared more stories about his parents, and Hans related some of his own memories from growing up with the boys' mother. Mariah loved watching his eyes come alive as he remembered those days. She wished she could somehow see him as a little boy, but she suspected he was a lot like Peter, so maybe she was getting that chance after all.

Mariah smoothed Preston's hair back from his forehead and just held him close. He'd always been such a sober child, and now he seemed even more withdrawn. She didn't know how to reach him. Finally, after Hans had read the children a story from the Bible, she asked if she could see the book. It had some nicely illustrated pictures inside, and she thought Preston might like to look at them.

She turned the pages for him slowly as he studied each one. She wasn't paying much attention to it, though, her hands working automatically. She was listening to another of Peter's stories when suddenly, Preston sat bolt upright in her arms, and she almost dropped both him and the Bible.

"What's the matter?" she asked him.

Peter was at his side in a flash. "Look," Preston said, jabbing the page with his index finger. "Mama!"

Mariah looked where he was pointing. The page showed a chorus of angels gathering to sing the praises of the newborn Jesus, and one of them was a beautiful young woman with light-colored hair and a sweet smile.

"Does she look like your mama, Preston?" she asked. The boy nodded and clutched the book to his chest.

"See?" Peter said to his brother. "I've been telling you all along—Mama's with the angels."

Mariah glanced up and saw Hans wiping a tear off his cheek. Preston finally had a look of peace on his face—he finally understood where his mama was, and he seemed to be all right with the idea.

She swallowed a few times before she was able to speak. "Peter, could you go into the kitchen and get my bag from the table for me?"

He nodded, and when he came back, she pulled out some paper and a pencil.

“Preston, how would you like your very own picture to carry around with you wherever you go?”

His eyes lit up, and he nodded eagerly.

She took the Bible and placed it flat on the small table at her elbow. Preston slid off her lap so he could watch more easily, and that was perfectly all right with her because she needed the elbow room. She laid the paper over the picture in the Bible and traced it as best as she could. The lines that didn’t show through the paper, she just filled in, using what few artistic skills she’d picked up from Mrs. Browning’s art class so many years before. When she was done, she handed it to Preston, and he beamed, hugging it to his chest.

“Would you like one too, Peter?” she asked the older boy.

He seemed to think about it, then shook his head. “No, I think that needs to be special for him,” he said. “But I’ll tell ya if I change my mind.”

Mariah gathered him close. “You’re a very special boy, Peter,” she told him.

Several minutes later, Hans came downstairs after tucking the boys in for the night. He walked slowly, and she could tell he was weary. He sank back into his chair and sighed.

“What a day.” He rubbed his hands over his face. “I now understand why God sends children as infants. It takes time to work up to handling stuff like that.” He pointed upward as if to indicate what they’d just been through.

“And you got two at a time. You’re doing remarkably well,” she told him. She slid her things back into her bag and stood up. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Hans. Sleep well.”

She’d thought he was tired, but he was on his feet in a flash. “You’re leaving?”

“Well, the boys are in bed and the dishes are done. What else do you need me for?”

“There’s a little matter we need to discuss.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“I have a friend named Reverend Bing. He’s a pretty nice fellow, but he has certain beliefs about certain things, and I have a sneaking suspicion that if he were to find out that I kissed you this morning, he’d say something about us getting married.”

Her heart gave an extra thud, but she kept her face straight. “What would he say if he found out that I kissed you back?”

“He’d probably insist that we hold the wedding right away, especially since you’re here in the house with me every day. Unsupervised.”

“Doesn’t he think the boys are enough supervision?”

“No. A real chaperone is over four feet tall.”

“Hmm. What do you recommend we do, then?”

He took a step closer. “I think we should probably listen to the reverend.”

“You do, do you?”

He reached out and snaked an arm around her waist. “Definitely. Because you’re an unmarried woman in my house, and I’m not to be trusted.”

“You’re not?” She could barely speak.

“No, I’m not.” He pulled her close and kissed her again.

“You are most definitely not to be trusted,” she said when he finally let her go.

“I’ll go talk to the reverend in the morning,” he replied. “Now get out of here, Miss Redding.”

She grinned as she walked out the front door. Definitely, definitely not to be trusted.

Chapter Fifteen

Mrs. Gladstone helped arrange the veil over Mariah's hair, then stepped back and clasped her hands. "Oh, my dear, you look beautiful," she said. "I could never have dreamed any bride could look as beautiful as you do right now."

Mariah reached out and gave the woman a hug. "Thank you so much for everything, Mrs. Gladstone," she said. "You truly saved me when I arrived here. If it hadn't been for you, I don't believe I would have survived."

"Oh, you would have survived, but I made it a lot more fun," Mrs. Gladstone said with a twinkle in her eye. "Now, you've heard from your mother?"

"Yes, she responded to my telegram. She's sorry not to be here for the wedding, but says she'll plan a trip out as soon as she's able."

"It's too bad that she won't make it, but we wouldn't want to risk the wrath of Reverend Bing by waiting, would we?" Mrs. Gladstone beamed at her. "Thank you for the joy you've given me this past week, Mariah. I've felt alive again, being able to help you and to see you find true love. You and Hans and those boys—you were made to be together, and you will become the most wonderful, loving family imaginable. The boys will have a beautiful childhood, thanks to you, and the hurt they feel over the deaths of their parents will fade into loving memories. That's a gift you'll give them."

Mariah wiped a tear from her cheek. "Thank you. What a lovely thing to say."

A knock on the door signaled that it was time. Mariah gave Mrs. Gladstone a smile, and just moments later, she was walking up the aisle toward her groom.

As Reverend Bing said the words that would bind them together as husband and wife, she looked into Hans's eyes and was overwhelmed by the love she saw in them. They didn't know each other well, but she couldn't wait to discover everything about him. He had a little scar between his eyebrows—she wanted to know what put

it there and if it had hurt. She had already laughed with him and cried with him, and she knew they could weather every emotion together. She could so easily see the fulfillment of Mrs. Gladstone's wedding blessing—they would make a wonderful family.

Toria Jackson had volunteered to take the boys for the night, and her husband Mortimer and stepson John had worked for hours the previous day to whitewash the interior of Hans's house to make it bright and beautiful. Mariah couldn't think of a better place to spend their honeymoon than in their own home, made lovely by their friends.

"You know, I didn't marry you because I had to," Hans said after he carried her over the threshold and set her down on the other side.

"Oh? Why did you, then?" she asked, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"I married you because I had to."

She quirked an eyebrow. "What? You're not making any sense."

He bent down and kissed her nose. "I didn't marry you because I thought Reverend Bing would insist on it. I married you because my heart gave me no other choice. Getting slapped in the face with wet laundry, having to salt my own food . . . you were pretty irresistible."

"I've always believed that the way to a man's heart is by slapping him with laundry," Mariah said.

He grinned, but then his smile faded. "Seeing how you are with the boys. Watching you sitting in the dirt on the side of the road, holding Preston and saying all the things I'd never think to say in a million years. Piecing up the broken bits and making us whole. You're an astonishing woman, Mariah. And I have to say, you feel so very good in my arms."

"I'm very glad you feel that way, Mr. Jensen, because I have absolutely no intention of ever being out of your arms again for as long as I live."

"You realize that's going to make it very hard for me to do my job," he pointed out.

She snuggled into his chest. "We'll figure something out."

Mariah nearly had everything the way she wanted it. She and Hans had been working on it together every day for a week—whitewashing the rest of the house, hanging curtains, getting the boys a bed frame. They thought it was great and helped all they could, and she loved how they were able to come together and create a home that suited each of them and represented their tastes so well.

"You know, I just realized something," Mariah said as she rummaged through her dresser drawer late one night. "I think I left some hairpins at Mrs. Gladstone's. I'll run over there tomorrow and get them. I'm surprised she hasn't come by—she's probably trying to give us some space."

"Yes, newlyweds that we are," Hans said teasingly.

The next morning, Mariah fed everyone breakfast, then took the boys out for a walk. "We're going to see Mrs. Gladstone," she said as they headed that direction. "You remember her—the lady sitting across the way from me on the train."

"I'm not very good at names," Peter told her.

"Me too," Preston replied.

She smiled. Preston had been saying more and more ever since he put the drawing of the angel in his pocket, and she rejoiced in everything he chose to say. She had already known that he was a very special little boy, and now she felt like she was getting the chance to know him even better as he spoke.

They turned down Mrs. Gladstone's street. "This is where I lived when I first started working at your house," she told the boys.

"Where?" Peter asked, looking confused.

"In that house," she said, pointing, and then she blinked. That couldn't be right. She looked around. No, they were on the right street, but Mrs. Gladstone's house looked nothing like it had just a week before. It was a ruin—the turrets were charred, the roof had holes, the porch was broken off and sagging. "I . . . I don't understand," she said. "I lived here. I lived in this house, and it was beautiful."

"It's not so bootiful anymore," Peter replied.

Mariah turned around in a circle again. "Oh, look." Someone was

coming out of the house next door. They'd be able to help her. "Sir," she called out. He looked up and paused before going on his way. "Excuse me, sir. I'm a bit confused. I was looking for Mrs. Gladstone's house."

"Yes, you've found it," he said, nodding toward the charred structure.

"But what happened? Where is Mrs. Gladstone?"

He gave her a curious look. "Are you an old friend of hers, Miss . . ."

"Mrs. Jensen. I wouldn't say we're old friends—I only met her this last month."

He shook his head. "Ma'am, I don't know what to tell you, but Mrs. Gladstone has been dead for nearly five years."

Mariah took a stumbling step backwards. "Dead? That's impossible. She was at my wedding two weeks ago."

The man gave her a kind look. "I'm her nephew. Why don't you come inside—I have a portrait of her over my fireplace, and you can tell me if that's the woman you mean."

Mariah nodded numbly and followed him inside, the boys trailing along like little ducks. "This is my aunt," the man said, coming to a stop in front of the fireplace. "She was the kindest soul alive. She spent her days serving others, insisting that all her blessings meant nothing if she couldn't share them. She told me once that if she had her wish, she'd be a guardian angel once she reached the other side, and I believe that she'd make a perfect one."

"I do too," Mariah said, dumbfounded to see the face of her own dear Mrs. Gladstone staring down at her from above the mantel. "Five years, you say?"

"That's right. Are you well, ma'am? Can I get you a drink of water?"

"No, thank you," she said, managing a smile. "Thank you for your time."

She herded the boys back toward home, her knees shaking so much, she almost couldn't walk. When they arrived at the house, she sat down in the front room, trying to understand everything she'd just

learned. Five years . . . guardian angel . . . how was it possible? It just couldn't be.

Preston reached up on the shelf and grabbed the Bible, then brought it over and climbed onto her lap. He carried his drawing of the angel everywhere he went, but he still liked to look at the original. She wrapped her arm around him to steady him while he flipped the pages.

When he reached the correct page, he looked up at her and grinned, then pointed. "Look," he said.

Tucked in behind a cloud of glory and another singing angel was a woman who looked for all the world like Mrs. Gladstone, singing songs of praise with the choir.

"Just like the picture in that house," Peter said, looking over her shoulder.

Yes. Just like the picture in the house. Mariah didn't have the faintest idea how to explain it—she didn't even know if she could try. "Thank you again, Mrs. Gladstone," she said, hugging her boys in tight.

About Amelia C. Adams

Amelia C. Adams is a wife, a mother, an eater of chocolate, and a taker of naps. She spends her days thinking up stories and her nights writing them down. Her biggest hero is her husband, and you just might see bits and pieces of him as you read her novels.

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